MY SEED—THY HARVEST

By the same author :

SCORPION'S SUICIDE
WOMEN MUST WAIT
THE RAGS OF TIME
THE LAND IS IN GOOD HEART

In preparation :

O DAUGHTER OF BABYLON

MY SEED—THY HARVEST

A Novel by

FRANCES DALE

"THE World Exists for the unfolding of the Spirit and nothing less than Divinity is the true and ultimate goal of man!"

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To a Bishop and an old lady in an Almshouse. To a Councillor in a small town who said, 'May God prosper any who serve the cause of poor people.' To a woman at Westminster, a stout-hearted clergyman who labours humbly for the love of God, and to all the numberless of His children whose homes are a shame to a Great Nation; in the hope that in the days of peace for which such great sacrifices have been made, more sacrifices may be offered in order that Something Shall Be Done!

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PART ONE

MY SEED

CHAPTER I

THEY were about to bury Sir Josiah Dingleby. Already, though there was still another hour before the funeral procession was timed to form, the family was dressing; while outside the heavy brass-studded front door, two mutes stood patiently, their faces composed into masks of professional despondency, which was rendered much easier than usual by the intense cold of their position.

They stood on the last of the seven still new-looking, stone steps to Sir Josiah's hideous Victorian mansion, and their black silk hats gleamed like crows' wings against the snow. Behind them the front door itself declaimed the mourning household within. The massive brass door-knob was decently enclosed in a gathered bag of black *crêpe*, the whole secured with a quantity of wide black tape. Above them, on all four sides of the square, ugly house, the blind shrouded eyes of the windows made many more mutes, sentinel upon the house's privacy to the north, south, east, and west. Before them the drive unwound, shrouded in a winding sheet of freshly fallen snow which lay thickly upon the flower beds, where a few daring pale-green spikes thrust upwards in promise of their later snowdrop blossoms. It settled upon the clustered thickets of laurel and rhododendron. It masked the wide sweep of lawn in a veil of whiteness broken only by the many-sprigged footmarks of hungry, questing birds. The garden and house were silent and the dun sky above was low-hung in a promise of further snow.

The stouter of the two mutes eased his weight slightly from one foot to the other. It was just after ten o'clock in the month of February in the year nineteen hundred and one. For another five minutes the silence prevailed.

Then a welcome diversion from the monotony of their duty animated the two mutes as they perceived a messenger unhitching the latchet of the gate. He carried three wreaths. The mutes watched him traverse the drive scuffling the snow a little with his boots. Then they froze into statuesque poses as he mounted the steps and banged on the muffled knocker.

Very softly this messenger whistled beneath his breath . . . "Little Dollie Day Dream" . . .

"Shush . . ." hissed the mutes in unison.

The door swung inwards.

The blue-jowled butler, standing against his background of tesselated flooring, satin damask curtains, and vast gas chandelier, received the wreaths in silence, said "Good morning," as if his mouth were rinsed with alum and folded back the front door. This done, he marched with

measured steps across the hall and laid down the wreaths upon a long, marble-topped table which already supported a large gilt clock from which four gilt horses pranced outwards in ever-arrested movement. Then, with his head slightly bent, he approached a pair of doors adorned with floral finger-plates and handled with globules of multi-coloured glass, and eased them open cautiously as if afraid to disturb the inmate of the room beyond.

The lights within the room spread down dimly from another branched gas chandelier. The closed shutters made night within. The occupant of the room, wrapped in the final sleep from which no footfall could recall him, lay in his massive gilt-handled coffin beneath a pall of lawn and lace in the centre of a yellow carpet, which was wreathed and branched about with floral patternings, and matched in colour the bobble-edged curtains which draped and looped and hung in tortured folds above the tight-closed shutters.

The overcrowded room, of gilt mirrors, lacquer cabinets, gilt chairs with yellow satin seats, innumerable small tables, myriad ornaments, china vases, china bowls and gilt-framed pictures, brooded over the late owner of so much tasteless magnificence, engendering an atmosphere of dank futility. The lean butler shivered and then, approaching the coffin, laid the new "floral tributes" among the heaps which already dotted the surrounding floor and tables. In the many ornate mirrors his reflection was of a ghostly visitant, black garbed and chill.

He stood back and fingering his hatchet chin did inward debate upon some knotty problem.

The front-door knocker resounded once again, muffled in its black *crêpe* bag.

"We shall have to place the remainder of the wreaths in the hall," he decided. "Then I shall inform my mistress."

* * * * *

Behind the drawn blinds at the upper windows of "Laurelston" the deceased knight's widow and his children were preparing for the funeral.

Alaric and his bride Theodora were dressing themselves by the subdued gaslight and relieving their feelings, such as they were, by a little acrimonious debate. The only son of Sir Josiah, and the wife he had brought home a brief seven days before, were assessing their expectations in the privacy of their room, and apparently finding some cause for discontent in their deductions.

While Alaric discoursed in the flowing periods of the confirmed Shakespearean actor, and Theodora rubbed furtively at her rather overblown features with a hare's-foot, their innermost anxieties were, however, assuaged temporarily by this discussion as to the sum that Alaric would presently possess.

As he talked he examined his face anxiously in a mahogany box-dressing mirror. It was a thin face, weakly attractive, with a spoilt, unbalanced mouth, light-blue eyes, ever restless, ever seeking, and a small,

straight nose of which he was inordinately proud. He was tall, six foot two, thin (he privately called himself slender); and his eyebrows, which were curved and tapered, were the joy of his life.

He turned away from the mirror and picked up the astrachan-collared black overcoat which lay across the disordered double bed. Into this he eased himself, after which he began striding up and down on the thick carpet, turning his head to catch enchanting glimpses of himself in the pier-glass beneath the window.

"This cursed light," he complained, "how can a man see to dress?"

"How can a woman, Allie?" echoed his lady, fastening a pair of glossy-black boots with kid uppers, the silver buttonhook flashing in and out with the speed of long practice.

"I shall be glad when the old skinflint is in his grave and we can get on with our own lives." Alaric paused before the pier-glass and struck an attitude, "Oh, and by the way, Theo, don't call me Allie."

"Then don't call me Theo, duckie," said his wife, forgetting her refined accent for a moment and becoming slightly hoarse-voiced, "and come away from that mirror. I declare, Allie, you're as vain as a woman."

She rose from her dressing-stool with a flurry of petticoats and stood, in her underpetticoat and corset, with her plump hands on her curved hips. "Pass me my gown, there's a good fellow," she added in a gentler tone.

Alaric caught up the froth of black upon a chair-back and handed it to her, she shook it out, bent painfully and kicked the folds into a circle around her feet, stepped over the black rim, and began pulling the dress upwards.

"I hope," she said, "you will have enough to give me a maid. No lady can dress herself properly without a maid."

"Lady?" Alaric turned, grinning.

Theodora flopped back on to the stool and resumed her quarrelling.

* * * * *

In the next room, protected from eavesdropping by the thickness of the walls Sir Josiah had built, Augusta Foote, Alaric's elder sister, widow of Gerald Foote and mother of little Geraldine, sat immediately beneath the gas bracket, hastily detaching a rather sprightly black plume from her best black bonnet.

She was an elegant creature. Peevish-mouthed like all the Dinglebys, but with a certain thin grace, a certain air of assurance, which made her notable among her family.

Farther down the corridor, her younger sister Amelia, foredoomed to spinsterhood in her cradle, and an ever-prudent creature, was carefully unpicking the black *crêpe* band from her late father's morning coat in order to attach it to the sleeve of the butler's jacket. The band that had seen service for the death of Queen Victoria should now see service for its owner!

While she worked, with her long mouse-coloured hair piled upon her

head like a circular sewing-basket, a pair of steel spectacles upon her nose (that lamentable nose which suffered from permanent redness and an incipient dew-drop), she clicked her tongue in a monotonous sound not unlike a discontented cricket.

While her children prepared themselves for their father's last journey, Lady Dingleby, poor harassed wretch—stood before the vast and intimidating mirror of her vast and intimidating dressing-table and strove with uncertain fingers to adjust her flowing weeds. All the while her disordered thoughts played peek-a-boo with the little logic contained within her flustered brain.

Her vague, blue eyes, intermittently overflowing with futile tears, regarded her black, eclipsed image with distress; she shook the black veiling about her shoulders, hitched several strands of jet over her hat, and in a hasty endeavour to pull the veils through, succeeded in tangling herself into a coil startlingly similar to a kitten with a skein of wool.

At this moment there was a discreet knock upon the door.

"Oh, dear . . ." said Lady Dingleby. "Yes, come in, who is it? No, wait." All the while she was circling before the glass, chasing now an end of veiling, now a loop of jet.

"It's me, my lady—Bilson!" the butler replied.

"Oh, Bilson—yes, come in—no, perhaps not, what is it?"

"We have received so many floral tributes, my lady, I took the liberty of clearing the marble table in the hall."

"Oh, you'd better come in, Bilson—no, get me Victoria, send me Victoria, and then you can come in."

The distracted lady continued her evolutions and seemed in imminent danger of strangling herself when another knock sounded upon her bedroom door.

"Is that you, Victoria?" she cried.

"Yes, my lady."

"Oh, do come in."

Victoria, the head parlourmaid, came into the room with a whisk of long black skirts and stiff white frills.

She took one look at her mistress and flung up her hands.

"Oh, my lady," she exclaimed, "you do seem in trouble." She rustled across the room, and making little comforting noises, removed the widow's cap, thus disclosing the fact that her mistress's rootling had disordered her coiffure irreparably.

"Now, we'll just take all this down and begin again," Victoria said soothingly, "and there's Bilson outside wants to speak to you if you can spare him a moment."

"Oh, yes, Victoria, tell him to come in," said Lady Dingleby. "I must wear my jet, you know; Sir Josiah always said I should wear my jet for mourning; he gave it to me when old Mr. Dingleby passed over."

"Yes, my lady, of course, my lady," middle-aged, efficient Victoria soothed her mistress expertly. "And now, my lady, here's Bilson with just one small question."

Bilson, who had remained outside the open door, now stepped just inside and stood upon the rim of the carpet.

"It's about the—er—floral tributes, my lady," he explained, "we have received such a number—I took the liberty of clearing the hall table, the marble top seemed so suitable."

"Dear me." Lady Dingleby turned her head around sharply, thus wrenching it away from Victoria who was redressing her hair. Victoria retained hold upon a dingy transformation. The lighter-headed lady then said:

"I don't think that will do, Bilson. Remember, Sir Josiah always said the clock must never be moved."

"Oh, but I have not moved the clock, my lady, I have grouped the floral tributes around it." He sounded appalled that the idea of moving the clock had even crossed the mind of an occupant of Sir Josiah's house.

"Oh, well then, of course . . ."

Lady Dingleby promptly forgot Bilson's existence and turning about once more remarked to Victoria, "I thought I should do better without that curl, Victoria, not suitable. Dear me, I forgot to ask Bilson if everything was arranged for luncheon."

"Mrs. Blossom is seeing to all that," said Victoria. "Now, who will be there, my lady?"

"Mr. Alaric and his wife, Victoria," Lady Dingleby began counting upon her fingers, "and Mrs. Foote, and Miss Amelia, that's four, and Mr. Proberty, to read the will, and Sir Josiah's brother, Mr. Samuel, oh, and Mrs. Samuel, if her rheumatism permits, and my sister Lucy, that's Mrs. Waterhouse, you know, and I think that's all."

"Nine altogether," said Victoria, wrapping the grey hair around the transformation.

"Oh, is it? I quite thought it was eight!" Lady Dingleby began wiggling about among her fingers once more. "Now, isn't that silly, I made it seven this time!"

Victoria made no comment and finished the coiffure neatly. She then dropped the treble coil of jet over her mistress's head and began arranging the widow's cap and weeds.

"Very distinguished," said Victoria insincerely, standing back at last.

Lady Dingleby examined her submerged appearance.

"I never had enough inches, Victoria," she regretted. "Sir Josiah always said, 'Too short in the leg.' Sir Josiah admired women with presence. He always called my sister Lucy 'a fine figure of a woman'."

Victoria pictured mentally the full-sailed galleon which was Mrs. Waterhouse and she permitted herself to remark austerely, "I prefer your ladyship," after which she asked permission to withdraw, and whisked herself out of the room.

* * * * *

Rose Cottle, the kitchen-maid, who was on the attic floor for the sole purpose of changing her apron before partaking in mid-morning cocoa

below stairs, crossed over to the small window of the room she shared with Bet Gardiner, the scullery-maid, and cautiously eased up a bare inch of blind.

She could see the gate, a wedge of the drive, and one side of the shrubbery.

As she watched, a barefoot child unlatched the gate, and picking up a heavy basket of groceries, edged himself around the opening and reclosed the gate.

"Lor," said Rose aloud, "Tommy"—and she fled down the uncovered back stairs to forestall cook at the back door.

Down the wooden stairway clattered the flying figure shod in flat, black, ankle-strap shoes, along the stone passage towards the "servants' quarters" with her print skirts flying and a flash of flannel petticoat visible beneath. The transition in temperature as she opened the kitchen door was sharp and welcome.

It was warm in here. The heat from the range poured out over the scrubbed brick floor, the leaping flames twinkled in the cluster of copper pans above the dresser, they postured in the thick white cups and saucers on the bare, scrubbed kitchen table.

The kitchen cat, perfectly distinct from the drawing-room cat, slumbered in a crescent before the fire, his glossy black coat shining like wet velvet.

Rose scurried on, with her stiff apron crackling like vellum. She pattered down the final passage-way and wrenched open the back door.

"'Ullo, Tommy," she said, "'ere, gimme that." She took the basket and poked a red, chapped finger between the groceries. "Cook was waiting for them sultanies," she remarked.

Looking from the small boy to the thin girl it was possible to detect the relationship. They both had the same snub noses, the same brown eyes, with surprising, light, sandy eyelashes, the same hair, evincing an irrepressible tendency to curls, the same bright cheeks, flying their banner of defiance towards the consistent malnutrition of their owners.

Rose nodded to her brother. "Better wait here to-day," she advised. "We're buryin' the master this morning, and cook's in none too good a temper."

"Then gimme me basket," said Tommy hoarsely, rubbing one purple foot against one purple spindly leg. He hopped on to the back-door mat and began flexing his toes against the unaccustomed comfort.

As Rose re-entered the kitchen with the basket, cook emerged from the housekeeper's room which adjoined, saying:

"About time young Tommy got here with them things. Give 'im back 'is basket. I've no time for urchins this morning." By this she explained her reason for not supplying Tommy's "drop o' cocoa of a morning," as was her custom.

Rose did as she was bid, while cook smoothed her spotless white apron over her more than generous bosom, and called to Bet to make the cocoa.

This done she sent Rose off to collect the remainder of the servants, saying rather sharply, "There'll be no call for chatter this morning, so

see to it that they hurry, my girl," after which she did a ponderous about turn to the housekeeper's room once more and Bet made the cocoa.

* * * * *

They were all sipping their cocoa. Bilson had remarked, before he passed through to join Mrs. Blossom, the housekeeper, and Soames, the cook, "if there's any more rings at the bell perhaps you'll kindly answer the door, Mabel," and Mabel, the parlour-maid, had replied obediently, "Certainly, Mr. Bilson," adding after the door was closed, "He'll never let me in case he misses something," after which she seated herself at the kitchen table and drank with her little finger stuck out in haughty gentility.

Fully conscious of their place, Emily, the upper housemaid, and Prudence, her underling, a buxom country girl with fat legs and thighs, sipped their steaming drinks in respectful silence until Mabel opened the conversation. Bet and Rose eyed each other over the rims of their cups and giggled.

"No time for levity," remarked Mabel, who wore a bangle and considered herself something of a belle. "A very sad occasion."

Victoria sniffed audibly. "For who, might I arsk?" she inquired sourly.

"For his pore widow and sorrowing children," Mabel continued undaunted.

"Fat lot Mr. Alaric cares," said Victoria defiantly, "and that wife of his, and as for the pore missus . . ." Victoria trailed off.

"If you mean her ladyship," said Mabel, "I'm shaw she knows what's fitting."

"Wot's fitting and wot you feel's as different as chalk from cheese," snapped Victoria, who was obviously out of humour. "I'd like to know who's going to get all his money."

Bet and Rose listened wide-eyed to all this. Then Rose ventured daringly, " 'Ole Skinflint' they call 'im down South Side."

Mabel and Victoria joined fronts immediately. "That will do," they said in dreadful accents, and Mabel added, "Kitchen-maids and scullery-maids should be seen and not heard," whereupon she set down her empty cup and rustled out of the kitchen.

The sound of the muffled knocker was heard again. There was general uprising and Bilson came out, adjusting his jacket. He paused and looked at the two youngest girls. "You girls will remain in the lower regions," he pronounced, "until the *cortège* 'as departed. Mrs. Blossom and I will be departing last, as is fitting, and I shall look back. Let there be no peeking under blinds."

He then stalked out of the kitchen and Mrs. Blossom followed him shortly afterwards, wearing her best black bombazine and carrying a large Bible and Prayer Book.

* * * * *

The "floral tributes" were now banked upon the marble-topped table. The four horsemen were eclipsed, and here a flowing gilt mane and there a glistening rein triumphed very slightly above the tortured, wired arum lilies, camelias, fresias, and lilies of the valley. The sickly scent of the lilies conspired suffocatingly with the muffled warmth of the atmosphere.

Alaric Dingleby descended the staircase, cradling his glossy black hat as though it were a helmet and he one of the courtiers attendant upon King Lear. He flourished his way towards the hall, obviously put out by the lack of rustle from stalls and darkness of a hushed auditorium.

Bilson was advancing towards the door.

"Those flowers," said Alaric with a deep tremulo, "they stifle me, Bilson."

"Yes, sir." Bilson reached the door and opened it. Mrs. Waterhouse stood upon the top step.

"Good morning, madam," said Bilson, stepping on one side, "will you step in, madam?"

"Aunt Lucy," said Alaric throatily.

"Ha—Alaric!" said Mrs. Waterhouse, and swept over the step. She put out one hand, tightly encased in a black kid glove.

Alaric bowed over it gracefully.

"Such a sad occasion, Aunt," said Alaric. "All right, Bilson, I'll take care of Mrs. Waterhouse."

Bilson said, "There is coffee in the library, sir. Perhaps madam would care to wait in there." Then he departed.

"Where's Evaline?" demanded Mrs. Waterhouse, shaking out her skirts like a brigantine unfurling sail.

"Not down yet, Aunt Lucy."

"Tears, I suppose," said the lady briskly, "tears and the megrims. Always was weakly. Should be delighted. Free at last. Too long down-trodden to realize her luck, I suppose." These remarks she fired out sharply, meanwhile advancing upon the double doors of the library. She was a vast woman, magnificently upholstered, large-faced, large-footed, carrying a large umbrella, a jet-adorned black reticule dangled from her left wrist.

Alaric followed her, thinking, "Sort of woman who would always mask me on the stage!"

They went into the library where a big fire burned beneath the marble mantelpiece and the portrait of Sir Josiah in the Mayoral robes.

Mabel stood behind a table at the shrouded windows busy with a vast silver tray.

The busts upon their stands, the uncut books in orderly and unused rows, the horsehair chairs and the console table gloomed darkly around them.

"Will you take coffee, madam?" inquired Mabel.

"Strong, plenty of sugar, hot," said that lady, impacting forcefully upon a horsehair sofa. She surveyed Alaric thoughtfully as he sunned his behind in the radiations from the vast fire. "Well, what's your wife like? Never thought you'd marry. Too selfish."

Alaric laughed. An affronted sound. "Theodora will have the honour of being presented to you in a moment," he said, playing with the eye-glass which dangled on to his narrow chest from a broad black ribbon.

"Theodora who?"

"My wife's maiden name was La Valle—an old French family."

"Sounds stagy to me," said his aunt with a sniff. "Thank you, Mabel. You can go. I'll ring if I want you." Mrs. Waterhouse sipped her coffee and scrutinized her nephew. "Quite sudden, wasn't it? Marry in haste, repent at leisure."

Alaric's colour was mounting rapidly. Then the doors opened and Bilson announced, "Mr. Proberty."

The family lawyer bustled into the room in his black suit and buttoned boots, carrying a large despatch case.

"Ah, Proberty?" exclaimed Mrs. Waterhouse, "the man of the moment! Alaric, pull the bell, Mr. Proberty will be glad to drink a cup of coffee."

Mr. Proberty buttoned up his face, which was small and round and rosy, against any possible expressions either suitable or unsuitable, and looking like a blank and coloured apple he rolled himself on to the hearth-rug and stretched his veined hands to the fire.

"How is your poor mother?" he inquired, after he had exchanged greetings. "Her ladyship bears up as well as can be expected, I hope?"

"Fiddlesticks!" said Mrs. Waterhouse. Mabel returned to dispense more coffee.

Both men appeared to be debating the implications of Mrs. Waterhouse's "fiddlesticks." The sound of Mabel's skirts was loud as she rustled towards the group.

"Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Dingleby," said Bilson, reappearing.

"Lucy, my dear!" A little woman in a large bonnet darted across the room, looking like a London sparrow that has been sprinkled with soot. "How well you look, dear, how glad I am to see you, and how magnificent Alaric has become. I declare Mr. Proberty looks blooming, too."

"Cecilia Jane," said Samuel Dingleby, placing his feet carefully before him in angles, like a pompous goose, "a little less levity, I implore you. This is a funeral gathering not a celebration of nuptials, you know."

He continued his slow march towards the fireplace, Cecilia Jane, crest-fallen, was scrabbling at her lower lips with cotton-gloved fingers, Alaric sniggered, and Mrs. Waterhouse as usual flung in her contribution.

"In a manner of speaking it's both, Sammy," she said, bridling. "Don't forget Alaric is a bridegroom."

"Ah, yes." Samuel looked slyly at his nephew, an expression of lasciviousness touching his full red lips. "I had forgotten. Alaric, I must congratulate you, in so far as is fitting upon such a meeting."

Alaric looked at his uncle with thinly hidden loathing.

The great moon face, the wet, scarlet mouth, the fat, white hands, the pointed loose-jointed feet, this was the very excellence of abomination in his little soul, too small to admire even the full-blooded beastliness of his senior.

"Thanks," he said shortly. "Aunt, will you take coffee?"

Samuel Dingleby unlatched his half-hunter and snapped back the lid. "I hardly think you have time, Cecilia Jane," he said.

"Oh, no—certainly not—quite—no, thank you, Alaric." Mrs. Samuel Dingleby crept into a chair and folded her feet in their wrinkled black-buttoned boots. She looked at the carpet as if it were her only refuge.

Samuel Dingleby began to speak. He made conversation as if he were addressing a meeting, and Mrs. Waterhouse fidgeted. At length she cut across one of his rolling periods.

"The women in this family are sadly late," she said sharply, whisking a broadly black-edged handkerchief from her reticule and blowing her nose with a trumpeting sound.

"As I was saying . . ." boomed Mr. Samuel.

Then the doors opened once more and the remainder of the family came in. The doorway was a cluster of veiling and black draperies and black feet against the panelling and the lush reds and greens of the carpet. Lady Dingleby immediately began to cry.

"Hush, Mother," said Amelia, whose nose was even redder than usual. She placed a skinny arm around her mother's shoulder. Mrs. Foote swept forward with assurance. "When you have all paid your respects at the coffin," she said calmly, "we will take our seats in the carriages."

Lady Dingleby considered this the signal for a fresh sound of weeping. The men began a peculiar dance in slow motion, indicating their willingness to cede precedence in the matter of "paying respect" to the coffin in the drawing-room.

At length Alaric moved gracefully to the head of the line and they went out like a farmyard procession, leaving the women alone. Alaric immediately returned.

Theodora made her entrance to him. She paused at the opened doors, said, "Ah!" and "Alaric, my love!" and holding out an ungloved hand waited for her husband to lead her forward. Alaric complied and presented his bride.

"Mrs. Samuel Dingleby, my wife—Mrs. Waterhouse, my wife."

Mrs. Samuel said "my dear" tremulously, and got on tiptoe to peck at the lightly rouged cheek.

Mrs. Waterhouse proffered two fingers and stared piercingly.

"The carriages await you, my lady," said Bilson.

Lady Dingleby wept anew; Amelia dabbed at her eyes. Theodora took the hint and produced an even blacker-edged handkerchief which she applied to her own eyes. Alaric bowed to his mother, offered his arm and said, "Courage, Mother!" in a tone which caused Mrs. Waterhouse to snort once more.

The men were a group of hovering ravens in the doorway, through which the coffin was being carried. The hall was a mill of black figures, Bilson endeavouring to sort them out. The drive was thick with carriages, away beyond the gate other carriages could be seen thickly lined against the kerb. The men marched down the steps with the coffin. The hearse received its burden. It vanished beneath the lilies, the camelias, the

violets, and the "everlasting" flowers. The sprigs of laurel glistened amid the flowers.

Very slowly the hearse moved. The snow was scuffled beneath the horses' feet. The sound of carriage wheels crunched up slowly. The scrat-scrat of the horses' hoofs was doubly vibrant in the enframing silence.

In the first carriage went Lady Dingleby, Alaric, Mr. Samuel and Cecilia Jane. In the second carriage, Mrs. Foote, Mrs. Waterhouse, Mrs. Alaric Dingleby. In the third, Miss Amelia and Mr. Proberty.

The hearse was through the gates now, and fifty yards down the road. The plumes upon the horses' heads were dancing in the breeze. The three carriages threaded their way into position behind. The first of the carriages against the kerb moved forward. Down the long line of vehicles movement flickered slowly. The crowds upon the pavements gaped and stared. Handkerchiefs flourished, blooming like dank flowers in the dark interior of the carriages. The hearse moved forward once more—scrat-scrat, ran the sound of hoofs down the long waving line, and clip, clip, clip-clippety-clip—the irregular motion undulated the black ribbon upon the white spattered road.

Sir Josiah had embarked upon his last journey, and with stately magnificence Mrs. Blossom, the housekeeper, and Mr. Bilson, the butler, made their way towards the last carriage of all, into which they climbed . . . while Rose and Bet, in round-eyed defiance, peered through two convenient holes in the blinds of the top attic.

Once more the snow began to fall.

* * * * *

Josiah Dingleby was born in eighteen hundred and thirty. He died in nineteen hundred and one. He left one hundred and fifty thousand pounds, a vast hideous house, and two carriages. The house he had built twenty years previously in the town in which he had spent all his life.

In those seventy-one years, Josiah Dingleby travelled a long way . . . by material standards.

"Old Joe," his father, a small tradesman with religious mania, had died as he lived—impoverished. "Young Joe," throwing on to the distaff side, had emulated his mother, a slut with intelligence enough to achieve the state of matrimony which neither her mother nor her grandmother had been clever enough to win for themselves.

"Old Joe" ran a small second-hand furniture business down on the South Side of "Easterbridge," an ancient market town in the county of Southdown. When he was not rootling among the unwanted rubbish in the attics of the "residents," nor scrabbling among the filthy stock in his equally filthy shop, "Old Joe" was preaching at the corners of the "market square," gunning for his God with an energy which he failed to subscribe towards his more material labours.

At twelve years of age, "Young Joe" was carrying broken chairs and old frame bedsteads towards the "shop" for "Dad," and picking over the heaps of rags in the back room which served as sorting-house and living-room combined.

When his labours were done, he held horses' heads for halfpence, and spent his earnings in the back rows of the "Palladium" Theatre up along "West Side," where the fit-ups graced the boards with their Grand Benefit Performances and not infrequently were run out of the town for their pains.

"Old Joe" died when "Young Joe" was fifteen, and that enterprising youngster took over, with the compliance of his fading mama who hurried towards her mate with fairly rapid consumption.

The shop was cleaned up, the stock overhauled, a broken hand-truck repaired and pushed about the town, and from eight till ten each morning young Joe pushed his barrow, giving pence in exchange for the rubbish which his customers brought to their doors for him.

When "Young Joe" returned to the shop, he took down the shutters, uncovered the cleaned windows, and stood some of his wares upon the pavement with the prices marked upon them with bits of coloured chalk.

When he was twenty he moved to larger premises, took on a "helper," a small boy to whom he gave three shillings a week and divers cuffs around the ears; and he began adding cheap jewellery and glassware to the second-hand articles he offered for sale.

When he was thirty he built "Dingleby's Emporium" and did a roaring trade among the young couples in the district with his shoddy furniture. By this time he had started a small factory. Within another five years he was a member of the local council, a churchwarden and a Man-to-be-Reckoned-With in local affairs, and then he began building. Row after row of houses Josiah Dingleby erected. Shoddy houses, two up and two down in some cases, one up and one down in others, while his wealth grew and multiplied, and he gave money to all the local charities and married the daughter of an Easterbridge solicitor over whom he had established a firm financial hold.

By the time Alaric was five his father was the richest tradesman in Easterbridge . . . by the time he was ten "Laurelston" was alive in blueprints, and the knighthood followed upon old Josiah's largest and most published donation to the "Cottage Hospital." Sir Josiah had arrived.

It was of very little importance that the circumstances of his arrival constituted consistent legal frauds; the charging of high rentals for the occupation of bad houses—the charging of high prices for matchboard furniture and cheap varnish—the levelling of threats—the calling in of mortgages—the paying of bribes—the applying of pressure. Sir Josiah was a "business man"—later "an industrialist." These things are, mayhap, not for the squeamish, but they are for the "commercially successful," particularly when the beginnings have been small. And if the eleventh and most important commandment is fulfilled, "thou shalt not be found out," who is there that will not admire the achievements of the successful? Who but the oppressed and the needy who will dare to criticize the methods by which such advancements have been made?

Certainly not the fellow-churchwardens—fellow-tradesmen, too—men who sell wood—and varnish—and paints, and plaster and screws and nails and bolts! Certainly not the papas of unmarried misses whose only hope

lies in the matrimony which they must win for themselves *at all costs,* certainly not the grocer, or the butcher, or the baker, to whom flow out ever-increasing orders for the ever-enlarging establishment of the Great Man!

And so the narrow circle tightens. A ring of graft and lip-service carefully encloses the miscreant from detection . . . and when the circle has worn thin, too thin to protect the great man from the inescapable demands of destiny so that at length he dies, the last obsequies will be carried about in a last spate of lip-service . . . attendance upon the hearse . . . donation of great wreaths and sheaves and crosses, panegyrics in the local news sheets, tributes in the local church . . . all the sordid fanfaronade made to speed the unworthy toward the judgment of his Maker.

So much, then, for the life and death of Sir Josiah Dingleby. He is dead. He is gone. It is all over. The ripples have closed above his head. Presently the pool of death into which he has plunged will be still again, and presently he will be forgotten. Meantime, the Will is to be read, the allocation of his fortune is to become known, and fresh allegiance of lip-service to be sworn . . . and who is there to say where or to what infinity of time and place and tragedy the last ripples from the dead man's plunge may spread. . . . He had sown. The seed he has sown has yielded to him the thing which he has desired . . . his harvest has been sweet . . . to his sordid bitter little palate . . . but there is, in the unfolding of time and the relentless unfolding of events a later harvest still which will most surely bloom in the fullness of posterity, from the deeds of all such unscrupulous men as he.

* * * * *

Over the open grave stands the robed clergyman. His vestments flicker in the eddying wind. A scurry of snowflakes curls across the gaping mouth, and the earth is opened to receive its own.

On purple bands the coffin is eased slowly downward. The human carrion crows are grouped about and staring as the last rites go forward. The figures are all still. Only their garments flicker and lift as the wind plays with them, mockingly.

Amelia's nose is blue with cold, the drop at the tip is clotting in the wind. Lady Dingleby's face is a puff of swollen blotches . . . Theodora and Alaric are dramatically arranged with their feet in the third position. The little lawyer stands rigidly, they are all there . . . the relatives . . . Samuel who fled from home when he was ten and was brought up by his paternal aunt. Poor Cecilia Jane (the Dinglebys have a heavy hand to their women! . . . to their wives if not to their mistresses). . . .

They are all there . . . paying tribute to the God of Success and unthinking of the grim reminder that this must at length come to them, too . . . behind them the black figures press and multiply while the chilblained fingers of the local reporter stiffen agonizingly as he stands behind a cypress tree and scribbles furiously.

"Dust to dust . . ." the clergyman completes his duties. The cold,

half-frozen lumps of soil spatter down upon the expensive coffin; Alaric relinquishes his pose momentarily and bends over his mother.

And now it is over and they may all go home. The relatives pass through the opened ranks of the ordinary mourners. The carriages are regrouping before the church door. One by one the crows return to their small black nests. One by one the carriages wheel and turn and at a round pace go down the road from the churchyard. Around the deserted grave the reporter moves, fingering the cards upon the wreaths . . . copying the names into his penny note-book. So many names.

In the large kitchen of "Laurelston," cook is basting a good round of capon.

CHAPTER II

THE four very new oil paintings upon the walls of the dining-room shone down conspicuously upon the luncheon party.

They were very large paintings, in wide gilt frames. They represented Sir Josiah, in a frock coat, obviously incomplete for the lack of the caption WANTED; Lady Dingleby looking as if someone had bitten her—viciously—at no very distant moment; Alaric dressed as Hamlet and appearing to be in the last stages of galloping consumption, and Amelia, without her red nose and therefore almost unrecognizable.

Around and about these masterpieces were sprinkled such liberal applications of landscape, such browsing cattle, such pecking hens and somnolent horses, that very little of the pea-green wall-paper above the highly veneered panelling was visible to the eye, either naked or otherwise.

Pictures cost money. Pictures represented prosperity—there were many pictures. More colour was introduced into the room by the windows—which were of stained glass to the top panes, squares and globules of green and blue and crimson, apt to produce remarkable and startling effects upon the complexions of the room's occupants about the time of sunset. Added to which the curtains were also crimson, thick velvet, bobbled and fringed profusely. The vast mahogany sideboard was a-glitter with silver. The table, spread with a white cloth, supported in the centre a tortuous epergne, well filled with white flowers and trailing greenery.

The company was seated. Bilson stood, busy at the sideboard with two decanters—sherry and marsala—and Mabel was setting down the steaming soup-tureen before her mistress. Lady Dingleby gazed apprehensively at the soup, looked down the table, and said nervously, "Samuel, will you ask the blessing?"

Bilson set down the decanters, Mabel stood to attention and everyone except Samuel bent their heads. He rose and said, rather fast, "For-what-we-are-about-to-receive-may-the-Lord-make-us-truly-thankful-Amen." Bilson moved towards him and set his chair. There was a decent pause.

"Sherry or marsala, madam?" inquired Bilson of Mrs. Waterhouse.

"Marsala," said Mrs. Waterhouse clearly, "I am exceedingly cold." The soup and the drinks were dispensed.

The company began eating eagerly. Lady Dingleby left half her soup; Theodora, who was exceedingly hungry, decided that imitation was politic and pushed her plate away untasted.

Alaric wondered how he could steer the conversation round to his recent success with the Benson company.

"I shouldn't be surprised," he remarked to Mrs. Waterhouse, "if my chief received a knighthood one of these days."

All eyes focused upon him, and Mabel removed the soup and placed a large dish of turbot on the table.

"A knighthood!" echoed Cecilia Jane breathlessly. "But how wonderful!"

"Most unsuitable," said Mrs. Waterhouse. "In my mama's day such a thing would have caused a scandal."

Mr. Proberty coughed, "Perhaps Sir Henry Irving has started a fashion," he suggested.

"An unfitting fashion," said Samuel pompously. "Commerce is respectable, admirable in fact." His amendment was prompted by his realization of his own status, as well as his even more successful brother's. "But when it comes to the stage . . ."

Theodora rounded in defence of her mate. "And what's wrong with the theatre, may I ask?" she said dangerously.

Alaric saw the red light and cut across any perilous reply.

"My bride," he said fluently, "is quick in my defence, Uncle."

"Oh, is *that* why," said Mrs. Waterhouse meaningly.

"Shrimp sauce, madam?" asked Bilson.

"Yes—and plenty of it. Insipid fish turbot—needs sauce." She helped herself liberally.

Theodora darted her new relative a killing glance. "Alaric is too modest," she said shrilly, "I shouldn't be surprised if he received one himself one day."

"Ah, my love, but you are prejudiced." Alaric was beginning to enjoy himself. "Although I do say my Orsino was very well remarked by *some who know.*"

"I always did enjoy *Love's Labour's Lost,*" said Lady Dingleby soothingly.

"*Love's Labour's,*" said Alaric throatily, "*Twelfth Night,* Mama, *if you please.*"

"Isn't that what I said, dear?"

"I regard it as fortuitous," Alaric resumed after he had recovered from the shock, "that I was not playing at 'Shoal' this week—it would have been most unfortunate."

"Dear heaven, yes," said Amelia feelingly.

The heads nodded like mandarins.

"Alaric goes into rehearsal next week," said Theodora, as no one else obliged with the question. "For Othello," she added.

"A great and moving part, the Moor," said Alaric, playing with the ribbon of his monocle.

"I thought you said it was Othello, dear," ventured Cecilia Jane.

"Othello," boomed Alaric, *"is the Moor,* Aunt," and he exchanged glances of sympathy with his wife.

Bilson reappeared with wine, and Mabel removed the fish.

Two capons were set down.

"Mr. Alaric will carve," said Lady Dingleby.

"Good Lord, no, Mama," protested Alaric. "I declare the sight of mangled flesh repels me."

"Bring the birds here," commanded Samuel. He shot his cuffs alarmingly and tucked a napkin into his high collar. "Good-looking birds, Evaline," he said, flourishing the knife with which Mabel supplied him. "Who supplies you?"

"Tompkins I think it is—Bilson, who supplies us? Is it Tompkins?"

"Yes, my lady," said Bilson.

Alaric grinned, remembering. "Tompkins"—so history related scandalously—had run barefoot about the town with "Pa."

Mr. Proberty coughed once more. His memory, too, was good. He engaged Miss Amelia in conversation. "The address I thought was most moving," he remarked, playing for safety.

Amelia's nose quirked a little at the crimson tip. "Most moving," she said. "Papa would have been delighted."

"Sir Josiah always admired a good sermon," agreed Lady Dingleby. "He was a very devoted churchman."

"Amen," said Samuel, laying aside the parson's nose for his own delectation.

Again a topic died.

Mrs. Foote set to work.

"I am hoping, Mother," she said, "that you will permit me to take you away with me for a brief spell of rest and recovery after . . . after . . . when I return." Her last-minute delicacy forbade her saying "after the reading of the Will," as she fully intended leaving the same afternoon. "Little Geraldine is counting on having her grandmama to stay."

"Oh, I don't feel, dear . . ." began Lady Dingleby.

"Nonsense, Mother," said Alaric, "capital idea. Very best thing possible. Think it good of Augusta to suggest it."

Augusta weighed him—sharp-eyed. "Wants mother out of the way, does he?" she thought.

"If I may venture a remark," said Mr. Proberty, "it does seem an admirable thought."

Lady Dingleby looked about her, realizing perhaps, in her small, dull mind, that she had only exchanged one form of government for another now that her husband was dead.

"Very well, dears," she said submissively, "perhaps you know best." She was so very sure, by training, that she must know worst, against whatever judgment she was ranged. "But," here one last flicker of determination burned defiantly, "I shall take Victoria."

"I can't think, Mama," said Amelia waspishly, "why you don't get a personal maid. Victoria is only a parlourmaid after all."

"White wine or red, madam?" asked Bilson.

"Red," snapped Mrs. Waterhouse.

"She makes me comfortable," said Lady Dingleby. "I shall make her my maid, then she won't be a parlourmaid any more."

Imperceptibly, Bilson hurried his dispensing. Such a gem must find its way without delay into the housekeeper's room. Mrs. Blossom must modify her attitude to Victoria forthwith. A lady's maid had status.

"Do I remember Victoria?" inquired Samuel, swallowing a large mouthful.

"She was with us before we came to 'Laurelston'," said Lady Dingleby.

Samuel concentrated. "What was she?"

"Housemaid, and before that she was in the kitchen."

"Don't recall her. What's her name?"

"Loach—Victoria Loach."

"What, Loach of South End?"

"Yes."

"I recall her now. One of a large family."

"Aren't they all," Alaric tittered, and the ladies looked shocked.

Mr. Proberty looked up. "Her father and mother are tenants of this family," he said quietly.

"Well, she sounds suitable," grunted Samuel. "Bilson, let me have some more cauliflower—I only hope the promotion won't go to her head!" He splashed some more cauliflower into the gravy on his plate and broke it up with his fork.

Alaric leaned one elbow on the table and shaded his eyes. His gesture suggested that he found his uncle's table manners a little indelicate.

"The floral tributes," Cecilia Jane was saying, "were truly beautiful. Josiah was certainly respected."

"Why not," demanded Samuel, sopping the remains of the gravy with a piece of bread. "Full of good works, Josiah was, when he knew they'd do him good," and he laughed loudly.

No one else smiled and Samuel sought to retrieve his *faux pas.*

Bilson took his plate.

"Will you take apple charlotte or queen pudding?" asked Mabel.

The luncheon was coming slowly towards its end.

When the queen pudding and the apple charlotte had been disposed of, with ample libations of cream, Mrs. Foote said firmly:

"Shall we have coffee in the drawing-room, Mama?" By which she meant, "Come along, Mama, and leave the gentlemen."

Lady Dingleby arose hurriedly, wove back and forth a little around Samuel, and finally fluttered out of the door which Alaric held open gracefully.

The gentlemen settled to their port, and the delicate and amusing game of "Pumping old Proberty" went forward. "Old Proberty," however, was a match for them. At three o'clock they emerged from the dining-room and went down the hall towards the library still in perfect ignorance of

the contents of Sir Josiah's Will. When they had settled themselves, the bell was pulled, Bilson was requested to inform the ladies that their presence was desired (his translation of Mr. Samuel's "tell the ladies we are ready for them") and Bilson was then at liberty to depart to the "lower regions" for his own meal, and savour, in comparative leisure, the detailing of his excellent piece of news garnered from the luncheon table. Moreover, there was quite half a bottle of red wine left, and now that "Old Skinflint" was gone, there was no one to check upon its whereabouts.

* * * * *

In the library, Mr. Proberty, who had seated himself at Sir Josiah's desk with the Spanish leather top, was taking out folders and documents from his despatch-case, and arranging them neatly upon the desk.

Then the ladies arrived, and the business of the day was free to go forward at last.

CHAPTER III

ALREADY Alaric's bearing had undergone a slight change. The very way in which he leaned against the rolled chair-back, the slow, deliberate placing of finger-tips to finger-tips; the swing of his narrow foot in its cloth-topped boot; these things denoted the pleasurable anticipations of enhanced stature which his father's munificent bequests would engender.

His grasshopper mind—totally incapable of retaining continuous hold upon any one subject for more than a moment—was alluringly inflamed by the pictures of his forthcoming magnificence. This grasshopper quality had permitted him to forget he and his father had seldom been upon good terms together; that their relationship had, in fact, consisted of nine parts scenes and the tenth part absence; that his allowance of five hundred pounds per annum had been paid to him only as a bribe to keep his distance because he and his parent had been of such incompatible temperaments and that his latest return to the house, with his unheralded bride, only one week previously, had been the signal for another storm whose violence had dwarfed all previous scenes to littleness.

The storm had passed. Theodora's grand manner (culled from ten years' experience, as provincial leading lady, in such dramas as *A Bunch of Violets, The Tyranny of Tears* and *The Fool's Paradise*) had sufficiently deceived Sir Josiah Dingleby, whose knowledge of real ladies was fortunately limited. He had even gone so far as to admit to Alaric in a moment of rare expansion over the port that Theodora was "a fine fleshly bit of goods," and would probably flush the weakly strain of Dinglebys well enough.

It was only this last that Alaric's mind permitted him to remember . . . together with his own remark to his father, which had insinuated gently that Theodora might already be "with child."

Alaric was therefore fairly confident that the promise of this unborn child would "turn the tables" in his favour. His conviction was in no way

diminished by the sudden demand by Sir Josiah two days before his death that Proberty be summoned to make an alteration to his Will.

"*In my favour,*" thought Alaric pleasurably.

Mr. Proberty was coughing. His cough was a whole language saying, sometimes, "er, might I caution you to be careful?" sometimes, "er, might I crave your pardon for not answering that question?" or, as now, "might I crave the honour of your attention, ladies and gentlemen?"

Everyone attended at the sound of his current cough—favoured him with immediate attention, folded hands, arranged skirts and blew noses with a very apotheosis of concentration.

Mr. Proberty's fingers did a small tarantelle upon the tooled-leather top of the desk, and at last he began to speak.

"Before I read this Will," he began, holding aloft the document for one moment, "there are a few words of some import which I should like to address to the company. In the first place, I cannot do better than state, without any possible contradiction, that this is the last Will and Testament of Sir Josiah Dingleby, duly signed and witnessed, and *incontrovertible.*" He paused a moment to allow this to become fully accepted, he then resumed, "Two days ago Sir Josiah sent for me, when he was already laid low with that last sudden attack which took him from us, and he requested me to add a codicil to his Will. This I did, and the codicil was witnessed by my clerk and Miss Amelia Dingleby. These facts being established, I have only one more statement to make before embarking upon the reading. In respect of that prosperous concern known to us all as 'Dingleby's Emporium'; this business is no longer the property of the late Sir Josiah Dingleby. Acting upon Sir Josiah's personal instructions, I negotiated a sale of the entire property to a London firm, Messrs. Ogle thorpe, Prosser and Dibbs, to whom the buildings, stock, fixtures, and fitments were assigned for a sum which will be contained within the Will, thus adding considerably to the existing monetary assets of the estate.

"The Will is, therefore, concerned with, in the first place, Sir Josiah's monies, in the second place, his house, this residence in which we now sit, the contents thereof, all personal belongings and the several large blocks of property in and around the town of Easterbridge in the county of Southdown, of whose existence you are all perfectly aware."

Though an outsider might have been somewhat surprised to hear this summary prefacing the Will-reading, it came as no shock to the members of the dead man's family. They knew, and they knew Mr. Proberty knew, that there would have been an insistent clamour at the conclusion of the Will-reading if no mention had been made of the "Emporium." Therefore, forestalling their questioning, Mr. Proberty enumerated to them the items to be disposed of in the Will, and then set about reading it without further preamble.

Lady Dingleby sat back, looking very small in a very large chair and she shaded her ravaged face with a slightly trembling hand.

Alaric wore a more fixed expression of pleasurable expectancy and the remainder looked slightly anxious and a little strained.

* * * * *

The Will directed for small sums of money to be donated to Bilson and Mrs. Blossom—one hundred pounds apiece for years of hard service—these things the family accepted with sundry nods of great benignity. Their *amour-propre* was not affronted by the greatness of the sums involved.

"To my brother Samuel Dingleby, the sum of one thousand pounds," Mr. Proberty then read.

That was the signal for a change of front!

"One thousand pounds!" Samuel's pallid face turned sickly green. Horror was writ upon his countenance with no attempt at concealment. Samuel had obviously expected far more money! "One thousand pounds!" he stammered aloud, holding up the Will-reading, drawing every eye upon him, causing Alaric to look malevolently amused.

"Father always was generous," Alaric murmured.

Samuel took out a black-edged handkerchief and passed it across his trembling lips. His eyes darted from one to the other of his watching relatives. He said nothing.

"Pray continue, Mr. Proberty," said Lady Dingleby gently.

Mr. Proberty pushed back his steel-rimmed spectacles which had slid a little over the bridge of his knobby nose.

"Er . . . heumph . . . er . . . Samuel Dingleby one thousand pounds . . . ah, yes . . . now . . . to my daughter Augusta Foote, the sum of ten thousand pounds." This time the little lawyer paused, and looked up expectantly, obviously intending to allow any fresh ripples caused by this announcement to subside before he attempted to delve further into Sir Josiah's bequests.

Augusta Foote merely inclined her head with dignity, Alaric darted her a glance which held some reluctant admiration, and Samuel Dingleby wiped his shaking mouth once more.

Mr. Proberty's voice was lifted yet again. . . . "I give, devise and bequeath all the rest, residue, and remainder of my estate, both real and personal, consisting of approximately one hundred and forty thousand pounds, two hundred dwelling-houses, let on weekly tenancy, and 'Laurelston,' to my wife Evaline Lucinda, to my son Alaric Maximillian, and my daughter Amelia, share and share alike and direct that they shall hold the real property as joint tenants. I further direct that my said wife, son, and daughter shall only benefit under this my Will if they shall reside in my house 'Laurelston' situate in the market town of Easterbridge in the county of Southdown."

* * * * *

Alaric shattered the ensuing silence. He said with a distinct tremulo, "Live here, oh, my God!" Lady Dingleby emitted a faint gasp, and Mrs. Waterhouse said severely, "Alaric, I am affronted at your obscene language."

"God ain't obscene, Aunt," said Alaric.

Samuel Dingleby arose from his chair and began stalking from the room. His cup was brimful and running over, and his rage could no

longer be suppressed. Theodora sat with her mouth open, staring dimly into a roseate future which was as yet irreconcilable with fact. Could such a thing happen to her?

The silence lasted a fraction longer and then babel broke out.

Samuel closed the doors behind him . . . this was the signal. Little Cecilia Jane darted across the room to Theodora and said impulsively. "How happy you must feel, my dear, that you wedded dear Alaric before you became acquainted with his good fortune," and a blush mantled the younger woman's cheeks.

"Don't be a fool, Cecilia!" snapped Mrs. Waterhouse, who had a ring-side seat for this contest since her expectations had been nil, and therefore her personal emotions were in no way involved.

Mr. Proberty raised his voice. "Ladies, please, we have still yet a codicil," he protested valiantly.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Waterhouse with pleasure, "of course, the codicil, Evvie, my dear; there may yet be surprises in store."

Lady Dingleby ignored this sally and continued to sit half hidden in her chair. Theodora had risen and was standing before the fire-place, looking rather fine, with her head held high and a bright colour burning in her cheeks—this was a "lead" she had never imagined herself to be playing. A "lead" moreover, in which there was no need to "keep friendly with the management," since she *was* the "management" and could not be dethroned.

"Pray read us your codicil, Mr. Proberty," said Lady Dingleby. Mr. Proberty obliged the widow.

"I, Josiah Dingleby, Industrialist," he read, "of the market town of Easterbridge in the county of Southdown, make this codicil to my last Will and Testament of the twelfth day of February, Nineteen hundred and one, and direct that my son Alaric shall only benefit under my said Will if he can produce to the Executors of my said Will a certificate proving that he is legally married to his alleged wife Theodora Dingleby. In the event of my said son not being able to produce the said certificate his share of my estate shall be divided between my said wife Evaline Lucinda, and my said daughter Amelia."

For an instant after Mr. Proberty had finished reading the now white-faced Theodora stood swayingly before the fire-place, then with a piercing shriek her tall figure crumpled, and she fell in a faint upon the turkey carpet.

There was uproar in the library.

The women clustered around the stark figure—Alaric thrust his way between them, Amelia grasped the bell-pull and tolled it violently, Mr. Proberty dashed round the side of the desk, and Mrs. Waterhouse proclaimed in strident tones, "Stand back, the lot of you, and give the woman air."

Said Bilson in the doorway, "You rang, my lady?" and Lady Dingleby cried out hysterically, "Vinegar . . . feathers . . . water . . . smelling salts . . . fetch Victoria, summon Mrs. Blossom . . . open the windows. . . ."

The reading of the Will was over.

CHAPTER IV

ALARIC gathered up the unconscious Theodora and carried her out of the library. "I'll take her into the drawing-room," he said over his shoulder, "bring the restoratives in there."

There was no break in the traffic. Involuntarily they all streamed after him, Amelia, Lady Dingleby, Mrs. Waterhouse . . . even the little lawyer. They were impelled, by the unanswered drama of that faint, to follow the principal player until she should recover sufficiently to complete her tale.

Alaric laid her down upon one of the ghastly yellow satin sofas. The room had been rearranged since the removal of the coffin and now had regained perfectly its awful rigidity, where each chair stood upon its allotted space, and each eruption of white wax flowers bloomed decorously beneath each glass dome.

Bilson came to the doorway as the relatives filtered through, said "I beg your pardon" authoritatively, and bore his salver of potions towards the sufferer. Behind him marched Mrs. Blossom, stout, composed, and holding aloft a large bottle of smelling salts and a glass of cold water.

"Sal volatile, feathers, brandy," said Bilson gloomily, "which will you have, my lady?"

"Let her be," shrilled Amelia, struggling as it were to gain a front seat, "let her be. The wanton!"

"That will do, Bilson." Mrs. Waterhouse recovered herself swiftly. She relieved the butler of his tray and disposed of Mrs. Blossom with admirable expediency. "And you," she rounded on Amelia, "who appear to have forgotten the presence of the lower orders . . ."

"I don't care," shrieked Amelia, her red nose quivering with affronted virginity, "I don't care. She isn't married, that's plain to see. Daring to come into our house . . .!"

"Hush, Amelia," urged Lady Dingleby, shocked at the outburst, "I'm sure . . . you have no right . . . we should wait for Alaric to speak before drawing any hasty conclusions."

Alaric shot his mother an enigmatic glance . . . bent once more over Theodora . . . a smell of burning feathers pervaded the room.

"Cecilia Jane," said Samuel with vicious clarity, "kindly leave the room. This is no fitting scene for any man's *wife,* in my opinion."

Samuel was still smarting at the meanness of his legacy and the sting was plain in his tone.

Cecilia Jane looked imploringly at her sister-in-law, but Lady Dingleby's glance was averted. Obedient to her lord, Cecilia Jane trailed miserably from the room.

Theodora stirred.

Mrs. Waterhouse flung in her contribution. "If you ask me," she said loudly, "I should advise a little less condemnation all round. A fleshly sin, if such be the case, might add a livener to the milk-and-water tendencies of this family."

"Oh," wailed Lady Dingleby, and, "Lucy!"

Mrs. Waterhouse looked defiant. Theodora's eyelids flickered.

"I really must concur with your ladyship," murmured Proberty. "Hasty conclusions bring quick regrets. There is no cause as yet . . ."

Again Alaric lifted his head and stared.

Theodora struggled to rise.

"I beg you, Theodora," Lady Dingleby moved towards her, "I beg you, my dear, rest a moment yet. Do not attempt to rise."

"I am all right," said Theodora weakly.

"Are you better?" asked Alaric.

Theodora put one hand to her head. "Yes . . . I think so." She looked about her, still slightly dazed. At Samuel, standing apart, his legs planted firmly, his hands folded across his paunch. Furtive triumph in his little eyes . . . his red lips wet and glossy—at Mr. Proberty looking as if he were trying to appear tactfully invisible . . . at Lady Dingleby, kindly concerned.

"Are you well enough to listen to me, Theo?" said Alaric. His tone was most peculiar.

"Yes, I think so," said Theodora again. "What happened . . . oh, yes . . . I remember now."

"Never mind that," said Alaric, very much the master of whatever the situation might prove to be, "you just listen to what I have to tell you. While you have been unconscious," his voice lifted dramatically, "my dear sister Amelia has called you a trollop and a scarlet woman . . . in as many words . . ."

The assembly gasped, but Alaric continued relentlessly, "My Uncle Samuel, obviously enraged at the smallness of his portion, has ordered his wife from the room in case you contaminate her . . . Mrs. Waterhouse has restrained from condemning you, though she considers your faint proves that we are living in sin . . . and my mother has refused to stand in judgment until she knows the facts."

Theodora's faculties were returning rapidly. "Thank you, dear Lady Dingleby," she said, her voice low . . . then unaccountably she burst into tears.

"There you are," Amelia shrieked, diving once more into the fray . . . "guilty . . . guilty . . . she is a trollop. . . ."

"*Amelia, leave the room.*" Suddenly Lady Dingleby grew in stature.

Her daughter paused in her harangue and looked at her dumbfounded. "I shan't," she said at last, like a naughty withered child.

Theodora choked out through her sobs, "Let her stay; she had better hear everything . . ." and a rustle of expectancy shivered among them all.

Again Alaric said, "Are you well enough, Theo?"

"Yes," sobbed the distraught woman, "quite well enough . . . while they are all here I must speak."

Alaric passed her his handkerchief and struck an attitude behind the sofa.

"I may as well tell you," she gasped, when she had wiped her streaming eyes, "you'll have to know now. . . . I hoped you might never find out.

. . . I did so want to be a real lady. . . . I can't help where I was born. . . ."

Mr. Proberty came forward and said gently, "Madam, surely where you were born is not of consequence now?"

"Oh, yes, it is," Theodora sobbed anew. "That's just what does matter. . . . I never was Theodora La Valle. . . . I was Gertie Spring, born and baptized. My father was a publican in the Mile End Road . . . and my mother ran away with a sailor. . . . I ran away, too, and went on the stage with the 'fit-ups' when I was only thirteen. . . ."

Her sobs were diminishing as her tale unfolded. "I met Alaric when I joined Mr. Molyneux's select touring company. . . . I'm an actress. . . . I always have been an actress."

"Ghastly!" exclaimed Samuel, shivering with repugnance. "Thank God, my poor brother is not alive to hear this terrible story!"

"Will you proceed, madam," said Mr. Proberty, who had a singular look in his eyes.

"I never thought you would want to see my marriage lines . . ." here a fresh outburst of weeping broke the thread . . . "so I passed myself off as Theodora La Valle and Alaric helped me to make up the rest."

"Faugh!" said Amelia, quite past more speech.

Alaric patted his wife's hand. "Thank you *very* much, my dear," he said, lounging round from the back of the sofa. "But where you all made your mistake was this . . ." he surveyed the gathering with indignation. "Theodora fainted because she so feared your condemnation of her beginnings, which, though humble, were highly virtuous . . . and this caused the regrettable lapse from consciousness which you have witnessed recently." He thrust one hand in his high-buttoned jacket and brought out a paper. "Here are the proofs of our marriage, and here is the end to your sordid suspicions. Theodora and I are wed . . ." he paused to possess himself of his wife's left hand . . . "and shall claim our rightful third of my papa's estate though the whole world should oppose us!"

Mr. Proberty took the paper, and unfolded it.

"I must congratulate you, Mr. Alaric, upon your double good fortune," he said gallantly. "On your wife," and he made a little bow towards Theodora, whose face was somewhat blotched with emotion, "and on your inheritance, from which there is now undoubtedly no bar whatsoever." He thereupon folded the paper once more and handed it back to Alaric.

Without another word, Samuel Dingleby turned upon his heel and slunk towards the door. It banged loudly behind him.

"I thank you with all my heart," said Alaric, now pressing the little lawyer's hand fervently. Amelia was standing by the window wringing a small handkerchief to shreds. "As for you, Amelia," he added, "this is a large house and I shall thank you to keep out of my way, and my wife's way, in it."

"It's just as much mine as yours," Amelia swung round, her face working horribly, "and I shall go where I like in it, and do what I like . . ."

They had all forgotten Mrs. Foote, who stood in a corner, a silent witness to all that had occurred.

"Amelia, I should advise you to go to your room," she now said, coming forward composedly.

"Mind your own business," snapped Amelia.

Augusta Foote shrugged her fine shoulders. "Go along, Amelia," she said again, and the little spinster, after hesitating a moment longer, whisked past her and out of the door.

"Now," said Augusta briskly, "first let me congratulate you, Theodora, on a happy issue out of all your troubles. Perhaps Alaric has told you about *our beginnings*?"

"Gussie, dear!" remonstrated Lady Dingleby weakly.

"Please, Mother, we owe it to Alaric's wife."

"N-o, I don't think he has, Mrs. Foote," stammered Theodora.

"Well, Pa's father was a rag-and-bone merchant, and Pa pushed a rag-and-bone cart . . . so set your mind at ease. We have no reason to look down upon you." She bent over her new sister-in-law and brushed her forehead with her lips.

"I *thank* you, Augusta," said Alaric with feeling.

Theodora looked at him and began to laugh.

"Well," she said, "with all your fine airs and graces!"

"Airs and graces don't suit anyone," said Augusta Foote, "and now, Mother, may I remind you that we have a train to catch and the time for departure is rapidly approaching."

Firmly Mrs. Foote manœuvred the disrupted gathering into some semblance of order.

Lady Dingleby looked at Theodora and said rather uncertainly. "My dear child," and Theodora arose from her couch and flung herself at that lady's small feet, crying, dramatically, "Mother," while Alaric looked uncertain as to whether to applaud the performance or hiss.

Mr. Proberty then drew him to one side and said, "A moment together . . . in private . . . is it at all possible?" and Alaric nodded. He heard his mother protesting unhappily at the prospect of a journey after the trials of the day, and he added his word in her support.

"Surely, Gussie," he remonstrated, "to-morrow would serve as well? Why not despatch a telegram saying you have been detained. That would be perfectly possible. Mother needs rest, I do feel, and might be better able to endure a journey in the morning."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure," said Lady Dingleby.

Mrs. Foote wavered. "Very well," she said finally, "I will do that. Oblige me by pulling the bell and Bilson can telegraph immediately."

"*Mother* and I shall retire upstairs," said Theodora. "I think I will have a tray in my room."

"I want to see Victoria," persisted the widow, "Victoria must come to me. . . ."

"All right, Mother," soothed Mrs. Foote, "you go with Theodora and I will bring Victoria to you presently. Ah, Bilson, I want you to send a telegram for me."

The room emptied gradually, and Alaric was left alone with Mr. Proberty.

* * * * *

Once they were alone together in the cheerless drawing-room, Alaric's aplomb suffered a distinct reverse. He began fidgeting with his monocle . . . and appeared restless and uncomfortable.

Mr. Proberty paced the length of the room, turned, and marched slowly back again.

"Well," said Alaric impatiently.

Mr. Proberty turned once more and faced him.

"I will be frank with you, Mr. Alaric," he said.

"Oh," said Alaric unhappily.

"I am an honest man," continued the lawyer, "I have an abhorrence of untruths. Nevertheless, in my official capacity there are sometimes occasions on which it is politic to conceal, not so much the truth, as certain inexactitudes which, if revealed, would serve no good purpose and would in fact only bring distress and discomfort to certain parties."

Alaric began to look less miserable.

Mr. Proberty went on, "In the case of this unhappy scene which we have witnessed this afternoon, it is repellent to me to bring upon Mrs. Dingleby—your wife—any further discomforts, since, poor lady, she has already suffered enough, in my opinion."

"Too true," said Alaric unctuously.

"Therefore, Mr. Alaric, I am of the opinion that no good purpose can be served by the revelation of a fact of which you are perfectly aware."

"You mean," said Alaric miserably, "the date of our wedding."

"Precisely," said Mr. Proberty, nodding like a mandarin, "the date being one day before the addition of the codicil to your father's will, conforms with the demands of that codicil and therefore need not be mentioned to any member of your family."

Alaric stepped out and took the lawyer's hand. "I thank you . . . indeed I do," he said earnestly. "I am most sincerely obliged."

"Though I might add," said Mr. Proberty with something not unlike a twinkle in his eyes, "that I am curious to know for what reason you were not married before that date."

Alaric hung his head. "Not very partial to marriage," he muttered.

"Then why . . .?"

"Theodora insisted."

"I see. And now, Mr. Alaric?"

"I intend to honour my bargain," said Alaric.

"I thank you for your confidence," Mr. Proberty again bowed, "and I assure you that these matters shall remain secret between us. Now let us revert to other matters. In a few days I shall have need of your attention at my offices . . . perhaps you will be so good as to put yourself at my disposal?"

"Oh, certainly, certainly. Now there is—er—one—er—slight matter."

Without a smile, Mr. Proberty anticipated him.

"Perhaps, Mr. Alaric, there was one omission on my part. If you would be requiring an advance at any time I shall be most happy to oblige."

"That—er—was—er—the——"

"Precisely," said Mr. Proberty smoothly. He then buttoned up his coat, said, "Now perhaps you will excuse me. A very trying day for all concerned. If you will call at my office in the morning, I will see that monies are put at your disposal . . ." and eased himself out of the room, bowing as he went.

A few minutes later Alaric went up the wide staircase towards his wife's bedroom, singing gaily.

Mabel came out of Amelia's room and darted him a glance of darkest disapproval. He stopped singing and went to join his bride.

CHAPTER V

HENRY TRUSLOVE lived under the shadow of Easterbridge Castle, where the long winding main road—Eastgate Street—which ran south to the sea and north to the Midlands, climbed steeply upwards to its summit and the beginning of the "shopping centre."

Small courts branched left and right of Eastgate Street, some of them derelict slum dwellings, long neglected, long since in need of destruction, and some, under stout arches of brick and beam, spreading inwards to small trim dwellings with neat gates, and little tracks of stone pathway to the brass knockers upon their doors.

All Easterbridge was summarized in the divergence of those court dwellings: comfort alongside poverty—mellowed beauty fringing decay and dereliction, need the attendant upon plenty: mildewed failure shouldered aside by the blare of prosperity.

The town was set upon the side of a great hill. Once it had lain inside the city wall, with the gaunt lichened pile of the castle upon the summit of the hill and the townspeople clustered below within the safety of the city gates. Now the walls were gone, only a few broken remnants rose alongside streets which had spread outwards as the town grew and widened and only the twin archways, north and south, remained where once the gates had swung, opening upon the traveller, closing against the sudden rush of siege and battle.

The days of siege and battle were over. With the passing of such stresses the townsfolk had grown soft and uncaring. Industry prospered for the promoters, and if the poor suffered, who cared but the poor? And who among them could dare to shout in protest?

Henry Truslove came out of the small house in St. Anne's Court, where he lived with his young wife and baby son. He closed the neat front door behind him, tilted his bowler a fraction further to the left, grasped his umbrella and his neat sheaf of papers, and went purposefully down the path, out between the tiny twin lawns under the archway and into Eastgate Street.

It was eight o'clock, on the morning of the day on which Sir Josiah Dingleby was buried.

Henry Truslove was a small man. He had little hands, and little feet and a small woman's mouth, set below a strangely upturned nose which looked as if it had borne a clothes peg at its tip for regimentation in his youth. His eyes were quick and darting; he pattered, rather than walked. His wife said of him fondly, "Henry will get on," and his father-in-law echoed his daughter's words, "Mark my words, gentlemen, *Henry will get on!*"

At this early hour, Henry Truslove, pattering up the main street on his way to the valley and the slums, was bent upon a most important errand.

He was a busy little man. He combined the duties of rent collector for Messrs. Tanqueray and Stiles (the Stiles bought out long since), for and on behalf of Sir Josiah Dingleby, with the duty of scribe, or clerk, to Mr. Edward Heatherstead who lived in St. Jude's Court in a pleasant Queen Anne house and "wrote books."

In the mornings, Henry Truslove collected rents, in the afternoons he sat at a high desk with his legs dangling and his small feet pointed downwards while he copied in a flowing hand from the notes Mr. Heatherstead had made in the morning upon his current "book."

At present, Mr. Heatherstead was writing *A Historical and Descriptive Account of the Town and Castle of Easterbridge and of the Surrounding Countryside, to which are added Short Notices of the Towns and Villages, etc., within the Circuit of Ten Miles. Intended principally for the Information of Strangers.*

Here followed, upon the frontispiece, a Latin tag.

Henry Truslove was not, however, thinking about his afternoon occupation as he pattered downwards into the valley. He was thinking about the funeral. He was on his way to inform the occupants of the late Sir Josiah's houses that it was necessary for them to clean themselves and line the pavements before these houses to pay proper respect to their late landlord when he passed upon his Last Journey.

The two hundred houses owned by Sir Josiah, some built with considerable economy by that astute business man, and some purchased extremely cheaply, lay dotted about in the valley in the network of small mean roads.

As he approached the first block, Henry Truslove hooked his umbrella over his left arm and opened a paper folder. With this held open like a song-sheet and a newly sharpened pencil in his right hand, he knocked upon the door of No. 1, The Rock.

The houses with which he was concerned in this street, Nos. 1 to 10, stood flat and flush with the narrow pavements, their front doors opening upon the streets. A small window beside each door gave light to the living-room. Behind this little chamber, a door led to the kitchen, with one window looking over a strip of yard and a door leading out to it, the communal lavatories and the washhouse.

A tiny girl of about six years old, holding a baby in her arms, opened the door and said, "Yus?" apathetically.

"May Burrage?" snapped Mr. Truslove.

"Yessir."

"Where's your Mum?"

"She's gorne."

"Don't be silly," said Henry sharply, "gone where?"

"Gorne away—there's only me and baby. Me Dad's at the quarry."

Henry Truslove fitted this bare fragment of information to his existing knowledge and decided that Mrs. Burrage had fled from her unsatisfactory husband and family. This deduction proved correct.

"Well, where's Billy and Stan?" he demanded.

"Out," said May, hushing the baby with pitiful experience. "Me Dad's at work, me bruvvers is out." She continued hushing the baby and staring round-eyed at "the Rent Man."

"Now listen," said Henry, with as much patience as he could muster, "just you take baby and go next door to Mrs. Sedge. She'll tell you what to do. You have to Pay Respects to the Coffin of Sir Josiah Dingleby. He's being buried to-day."

May Burrage continued to stare.

"Oh, come with me," said the man at last, "I'm going to Mrs. Sedge now."

"What about me copper?" asked the child.

"What copper?"

"In the wasshuss. It's our turn with the wasshuss and I'm doing the wash."

"Well, you'll have to leave it now," insisted Henry, "and come along with me."

He turned on his heel and made for the next door. May looked behind her uncertainly, into the dim cavern of her home, then she followed obediently.

A stout woman came to the door in answer to the loud knock. Henry repeated his instructions and explained about May.

"Her Mum's lef'," said Mrs. Sedge. "Gorne off with a soldier from them barracks, couldn't stand Burrage no longer. She's lef' that kid to mind the 'ome and the baby and them boys."

"Well, well," said Henry, "sad, I'm sure, but I haven't much time, Mrs. Sedge, perhaps you will see that May presents herself at the door for the Passing—and her brothers, if they return."

He ticked off Nos. 1 and 2 in his folder and went on without raising his bowler hat.

Mrs. Sedge flung a very dirty word after him—softly—and said to May, "Come along in 'ere." She closed the door as Henry Truslove knocked upon No. 3.

Inside the "Sedge" dwelling-house, it was very dark. The single window was shrouded with soiled curtaining, veiling the winter daylight. The tightly closed window shut out any possible ventilation.

Mrs. Sedge, thrusting the child into a chair beside the kitchen range in

which a small fire burned damply, said in a hoarse voice, "Bide there and I'll get you a cuppa something 'ot," and drove her bulk forcefully through the crowded room into the kitchen beyond.

May hushed the baby once more and it fell asleep. There was a mantelpiece over the range, with a piece of dirty plush nailed across it, and from beneath, recessed above the stove, an iron hook dangled, empty.

Over the stove simmered a pot of water. In the middle of the room stood a table, circular, deal, with a single mahogany pedestal leg supporting it, and a dirty newspaper spread over the top. Some deal bookshelves, stuffed with rags of clothing, flanked the far wall, a chair stood on either side and a fellow to the horsehair chair in which May sat flanked the opposite side of the fire-place.

There was no other furniture in the room. The floors were bare of covering, except near the grate, where two old sacks were spread untidily.

Mrs. Sedge came lumbering back with two handleless cups. "Make you a droppa cocoa," she said in her hoarse voice, which sounded as if it had lain in a damp cellar unused for years and as if the owner were not quite accustomed to it once more.

"I oughta get back to me washing," said May doubtfully.

"Jest you set there," repeated Mrs. Sedge, "then I'll come alonga you after this 'ere funeral"—here she paused and spat accurately into the cinder-tray—"and rub out yer things for yer. Crool 'ard it is, you being lef' with them limbs and yer father!"

"I'll mannidge," persisted May.

Mrs. Sedge looked at the child curiously and slopped some of the water from the pot into the cups. "Wos there an up an' a downer?" she asked.

May nodded, "Mum come in and took 'er things. She said, 'May, you'll 'ave to mannidge. I'm orf. Remember wot I tell yer. Never do nothink for no man w'en you're a woman grown,' and 'er soldier 'ee stood in the doorway."

May spoke in a low, even monotone like a somnambulist. There was no animation in her narrative. Just a statement.

"Then wot 'appened?"

"Then Dad come in the back way. 'E saw the soldier and 'ee chucked a chopper at 'im. Missed 'im and 'it the cradle and woke the babby. She cried, so I took 'er up. Mum went for Dad and paid 'im one with a loaf orf the table. The soldier come in then and dragged 'er orf and Dad went up the street after 'em hollerin'."

"I missed it," said Mrs. Sedge regretfully, "went up to the 'Arms' with my gentleman friend. W'en I come back it was all over. 'Ere's your cocoa."

May laid the baby down on the sacks and took the cup of steaming liquid. Mrs. Sedge sipped and stared impartially. " 'Ave to wash your fice," she decided, "afore the funeral goes by, and take me rags out of me 'air. I'll wike Perce and my Polly up, too. They're asleep. Never went down till parst eleven larst night and now they're sleepin' like the dead."

She set down her cup and lumbered out again. May heard her calling

from the alcove in the kitchen up the narrow stairs. "Perce, Polly, wike up. Time you was awake. Perce . . . Polly . . ."

Mr. Henry Truslove heard her voice dimly as he came back again along the street, having completed his first batch of calls.

* * * * *

It was nearly ten o'clock by the time Henry finished his rounds. He made his way once more towards his home with little hurried steps, his mind darting about meanwhile among the plans for the ensuing hour. First he must see Mr. Heatherstead, and explain that he might be a little late in starting work with him. One o'clock was his time. Dinner was from twelve till one, but what with the funeral and one thing and another he doubted that his wife would have dinner on the table before one, and that would mean one-thirty at the least before he could climb on his high stool and begin transcribing in his fine copperplate hand.

This little matter arranged, Henry allowed his mind to dwell upon the pleasure of the morning. The unaccustomed return to his home. The cup of something hot, which his wife would have ready for him, and the slice of something cold on a plate to fortify him, while the lady of his choosing hurried about donning her best black bonnet with the riband of *crêpe* which she had attached after supper last night and dressing little Henry in his clean white sailor suit, with a new black collar and knot bought specially for the occasion.

By the time these pleasant matters had been digested Henry had reached St. Jude's Court. He turned in, rang the bell, and awaited the arrival of the housekeeper to admit him.

She came, rustling in her black, a gold brooch encasing a knot of hair pinned in the valley between her corset-constricted breasts.

"Good morning, Henry," she said benignly.

"Good morning, Mrs. Tritt," said Henry, thinking inwardly. "Henry! It'll be Mr. Truslove before I've finished, madam!"

"You want to see the master?" asked Mrs. Tritt.

"Yes, please, madam," said Henry.

"Step up to his study and knock," advised Mrs. Tritt, standing aside to let him in. "He's having his morning pipe and reading his paper."

"I shan't keep him long, ma'am," said Henry humbly, going up the stairs pitter-pat to the first-floor study.

"Good," said Mrs. Tritt, and she rustled away towards the basement stairs.

Henry scratched on the door. In answer to the summons from within he opened the door, and, hat in hand, said, softly, "Good morning, sir, I trust I find you well, sir," closing the door as he spoke.

Mr. Heatherstead looked up from behind his paper. He was a tall, lean, angular man, with an untidy, intellectual countenance, a shock of wild, grey hair, a craggy forehead, and a high-bridged nose. He wore a velvet smoking jacket, stained with tobacco ash, and a round, tasselled cap upon his head, with the tassel unaccountably dangling down behind.

"Ah, come in, Henry," he said genially, peering round the paper like a schoolmaster at a small delinquent. "Anything wrong, Henry?"

"Nothing at all, sir," said Henry, holding his bowler hat before him as if it were a shield and advancing two paces into the room. It's just the matter of this funeral, sir."

"What funeral?" said Mr. Heatherstead.

"Sir Josiah Dingleby, sir."

"Oh, that rogue!" said Mr. Heatherstead easily. "Well, what about it? Good riddance, I should say."

Henry sucked in his breath in horror at such blasphemy and stated his requirements with rapidity.

"Very well, very well." Mr. Heatherstead waved his meerschaum about benevolently. "Cut along, cut along. Come back as soon as you can, yes—as soon as you can. We have a very interesting afternoon's work before us. Very interesting."

"May I venture to inquire, sir, whereabouts we are this afternoon?" said Henry with a tactful display of interest.

"The Castle," said Mr. Heatherstead, now busily rubbing into the lapels of his jacket the fallen ash from his pipe, "the Castle and the theatre, places of local interest, short dilations and enumerations . . . very, very interesting."

"I shall return with all speed," promised Henry, preparing to withdraw.

"That's right," said Mr. Heatherstead retiring once more behind his paper. "Mind you close the door."

Henry was dismissed. He left the room, closed the door very softly, and tittupped down the stairs and out of the house without encountering Mrs. Tritt once again. In another three minutes he was home.

* * * * *

Mrs. Sedge wearied of shouting to her offspring. May heard her lumbering up the stairway. "Perce . . . Polly," she bawled. "Come on naow, Polly . . . Perce . . ."

She came pantingly to the stairhead and the back bedroom. They were one and the same.

Seven-year-old Percy and Polly, aged five, were coiled like draggled cocoons in two noisome tangles of ragged bedding upon an iron bedstead which entirely filled the room. There was a cracked pane to the window. The walls sweated with damp.

"Come on out of it," shouted Mrs. Sedge, still standing in the entrance.

The children wriggled. The cocoons came alive, disgorged their unlovely butterflies. Distorted butterflies, they were. Two pallid infants. The boy, close-eyed and furtive, the girl almond-eyed, the fruit from the loins of an Eurasian lodger—a pedlar in scarves and brightly coloured handkerchiefs, long since moved on to fresh fields . . . and bedrooms.

"Get downstairs," ordered Mrs. Sedge, "there's a buryin' on and we gotta get outside. I'll 'ave to wash yer."

The children struggled to sit up, rubbing the sleep from their eyes,

looking blankly at the unlovely room. Mrs. Sedge left them and lumbered into her own room, which at present, since she had no lodger, she was occupying in solitary state. When there was a lodger, she and the children shared the bedstead in the smaller room, until friendly relations were established with the newcomer.

She tweaked the tumbled bedclothes upwards now, ruffled the dented pillows, grasped a chamber firmly by the handle and made for the stair-head. Her housework was completed upstairs for the day.

Downstairs the baby began to cry.

Mrs. Sedge opened the back door and the cold air came swirling inwards with cruel venom.

"Hello," said Polly, coming into the living-room with her brother at her heels.

"Hello," said May, "I gotta get back."

"No, you don't, May . . . get out of my way, Perce," said Mrs. Sedge all in one breath, shuffling in and absent-mindedly laying down the chamber on the bookshelf, "you'll 'ave a bit of a wash and we'll give that baby a drop of sugar and water, then 'ee'll go off nice. Come on, now, 'and 'er over and get out at the tap. Come on, May, it'll freshen yer up, you see if it don't."

May obeyed, relaxing her patient watchfulness slightly under the familiar influence of authority.

The three children clustered round the sink. Mrs. Sedge ministered to the baby via a rinsed-out cocoa cup and a soiled teaspoon. Its cries diminished and died away. She dragged up the two sacks before the fire and scooped them into a rough nest. Into this she thrust the baby and wedged it between the wainscot and the fireside chair.

This arduous task completed, she sat down heavily, laid her stained hands on her massive knees and relaxed, while the noise of the children's voices and water splashing came to her vaguely from the adjoining room.

* * * * *

Illustrating with continued relevance the close proximity of need and ease which prevailed throughout the entire town of Easterbridge, the small block of houses owned by Sir Johiah Dingleby, Nos. 1 to 10, The Rock, joined immediately to No. 11 and so upwards to No. 16, and there was a remarkable difference between these first ten houses and the following six. In the first place they were under different ownership. Mr. Heatherstead was the landlord of the second group (10 to 16 inclusive), and it only needed a thin slant of winter daylight upon the faces of these houses to show how divergent were his views with those of the late Sir Josiah upon the question of landlord's obligations. Mr. Heatherstead's houses were equally small—in structure they exactly resembled Sir Josiah's houses, but here the resemblance ended. On the one hand were visible cracked paint, broken windows, falling gutters, and on the other, shining paint, clean windows, and the small snug look which springs from careful attention.

It was Mr. Heatherstead's custom to collect his own rents. Two and

ninepence per week. Each Saturday morning, dressed in his peculiar tweeds and a deer-stalker's hat, he went from house to house, raising his hat punctiliously, receiving money, handing change, casting a quick glance about him for signs of neglect and decay.

Mrs. Soames at No. 11 "thought the world of him." He gave her a pair of folding screens once to partition off the two narrow beds in her back bedroom, in order that the male and female of her brood might be decently separated. . . . He gave her, too, the whitewash and the brushes with which she redid the rooms each year. He made it "worth her while" to keep her home in order.

Mrs. Soames was a woman with a creel full of "babbies." She was thin and plain, a darting, bustling little woman, with wrinkled hands from constant immersion in the washtub, an anxious expression and a quick, flurried step as she whisked about her tiny house, busy from dawn till dusk about the eternal struggle of making ends meet. The day of Sir Josiah's funeral was a particularly grim one for her, and grimly she faced her problems and set about combating them as best she might.

An hour before the advent of Henry Truslove to the lower houses, Bertie Soames had trudged off with his handkerchief of dinner towards the tanneries where he had returned to work after his absence fighting in the war against "them rascally Boers." . . . And now he had returned. Outside in the yard the Soames children played in a tangle of arms and legs and inside the house, before the fire in the living-room, his legs stretched out before him, Bertie sat contemplating tragically the bitter inheritance to which he had returned.

"Stood off," he said for the twentieth time. "Stood off! And where's the bread to come from? And where's there work to find. It's the same everywhere since the war . . ."

"Per'aps they'll 'ave you back later," suggested Minnie. She stood against the table scrubbing potatoes.

"Not likely. There ain't nothing to do. It's not Mr. Harper's fault. 'Ee said 'e wos sorry." The sturdy, thick-set figure of the man was bent with worry. "Wot'll I do, Min?"

"Wot can you do?"

" 'E's tole me to go up to Poverty Knob."

Mrs. Soames thrust her knuckles against her mouth to repress a cry. "The workhouse?"

"That's right."

"Wot, to go in, Bert?"

"Naow. To work."

" 'Ave you bin?"

"Yus, I bin. I went straight along."

"Wot they offer you?"

"Trundlin' dirt. Takin' a barrow-load of dirt from one end of the garding and dumpin' in a 'ole the other."

" 'Ow much for?"

"Four loaves of bread a day."

There was silence in the room and the cries of the children came in muffled from the street.

"That's . . . that's better'n nothing," Minnie Soames stammered, her eyes flooded with tears.

Her husband looked at her dully.

"Shall I take it?"

"You'll 'ave to, Charlie'll 'elp. Charlie's wonderful, 'e is." At the mention of her eldest, Minnie Soames glowed with pride. "'E's got a job already."

"'E didn't need to 'ave a job yet awhile w'en I wos earnin' twenty shillin' a week," said Bertie angrily.

"Well, you ain't got it now. And it was a tight stretch on twenty shillin', any road. 'E's got two and sixpence a week from Mr. Paul, the grocer's, and with 'is fifteen shillin' a quarter for blowin' the organ it will 'elp no end." Minnie Soames began to brighten. "We'll 'ave to let the rent run on a bit. Mr. 'eatherstead'll never grumble. And then there's Tom; 'e and Charlie'll 'old 'orses and sweep a bit of dung . . . we'll get along, Bert . . . see if we don't. W'en can you start up at Poverty Knob?"

"I kin go back now."

"Well, you've got yer dinner. W'y not go?" Minnie Soames came round the table and put her hands on her husband's shoulder. "If you allus take wot you can get, sommink better'ull turn up, see if it don't. By the way, did I tell you there wos a funeral goin' by 'ere this mornin'?"

"'Oose?"

"That Sir Josiah Dingleby wot owns 1 to 10, them 'orrible 'ouses."

Bert Soames rose to his feet and reached for his cap and the knotted handkerchief which contained his dinner. "And there'll be enough flowers for that wicked old bastard," he said slowly, "that if we 'ad the money we'd make larst a year."

Minnie Soames let this slide. "There's one way for the rich and one for the poor," she said matter of factly; "grumblin' does no good. Get along now, Bert. I'll tell you about the funeral to-night. The kids can watch, and maybe all the kerridge 'orses'ull drop a bit on the road as ull come in 'andy to sell." She turned away and went out to the yard and shouted to Charlie. "Get out yer truck, son," she said, "and the shovel, see if you can git a penny on the dung, there's a big funeral a-goin' by presently."

* * * * *

They all turned out to watch the funeral. The hearse went by with plumes nodding at the horses' heads like sable banners whipped upwards in the breeze and the coffin was smothered in the final pall of wreaths, sheaves, pillows, and crosses . . . till the massed perfume wafted backwards and filtered down upon the odours of the shabby street.

The thin clusters of people fringed the road edge. Women in aprons. Women with babies in their arms. Old men with their pipes held away from their mouths—children, some clean and ragged, some dirty, all swathed in tattered shawls and scarves and mufflers.

Mary Burrage was there, still holding the baby. And Mrs. Sedge with her hair released from its papers, Polly and Perce clinging to her soiled skirts. Mrs. Soames was there, too, with her four youngest, the two eldest, Tom and Charlie, were out against the kerb edge, hiding their soap-box on wheels with their small persons, waiting until the last carriage had passed, to dart out into the road and shovel up the warm, steamy manure. Mrs. O'Twigh was there, too, from No. 14, aunt and guardian to the orphaned Rose Cottle that worked for Sir Josiah, and aunt to Tommy who worked for the grocer, Mr. Pretty, and to Stan the youngest who was at school still. They were all there. They saw the carriages go by with their burden of mourners. They saw the slow procession terminate, and the pedestrian mourners marching resolutely behind. Employees these last were, men from the warehouse, men from the "Emporium" . . . and Mr. Henry Truslove with Mrs. Henry Truslove and young Henry in his white sailor suit with the black collar and knot newly purchased for the occasion.

They saw it all, and when it was done there was only Charlie, with Tommy at his side, tipping up the soap-box on wheels to receive the steaming manure from the very middle of the road.

Even after it was all over they stood about on the pavement in little clusters talking. Mrs. Soames with Mrs. O'Twigh. Mrs. Sedge with the woman from No. 7 who was no better than she should be. Like to like . . . and then it began to snow and they went inside their houses and closed their doors and the two Soames boys went off to sell their barrow of manure for a half-penny.

The show was over.

CHAPTER VI

THEODORA lay upon her bed in a flounced pink wrapper which fell away from the waist upwards, disclosing the round, full curve of her breasts, upthrust by the constricting corset. She lay with one hand under her cheek, her face against a heap of pillows.

Alaric reclined in a low chair, conveniently placed so that he could regard his reflection from time to time in the cheval-glass.

"How much is the annual interest on fifty thousand pounds?" said Theodora dreamily.

"Eh?" Alaric looked at her absently. "Oh, enough for our needs anyway. With the use of this house thrown in, and furnished at that!"

"Not furnished to my liking—at least, not all of it." Theodora sat up abruptly. "Allie, can we refurnish some of the rooms? A study for you—my boudoir" (she pronounced it "bewdoir") "and our bedroom?"

"I don't see why not." Alaric sounded indulgent. "I shall want a great many things myself." He stretched luxuriously. "Lord, the relief of not having to face a scene with Pa every time I want anything. He kept me deuced short, you know, Theo!"

"You led the Company to think different!"

He waved his hand airily. "I hope I had enough pride to keep up appearances."

"Swank—that's what you did, my lad. Never mind, we can swank now without fear of being found out. We're rich! Rich!" She did not shout. She said the words over slowly and quietly. Luxuriating in them. Wallowing in a heaven of security which she had never hoped to gain. Like the prophets of old, she saw visions and if her visions were of gowns, feathers, parties, and triumphings over certain ladies of the theatrical profession who had not been too kind to her in the past—in place of the archangels and angels of the holy men, they were her visions and she enjoyed them to the uttermost. "I haven't a rag to my back," she said affectedly.

Alaric chuckled. "Lord, we'll have fun, won't we? Tell you what. This is a damned gloomy hole at the moment. How about a trip to London while Proberty sorts everything out. We'll just wait until mother is out of the way with Gussie, and then we'll mark down the rooms we intend to use and clear out for a while. How does that sound to you?"

Theodora sank slowly backwards on to her pillow. An exercise which must have strained her stomach muscles considerably. But it looked very effective.

"I can think of nothing I should like better," she said. There was a pause. Alaric gazed at the tip of his boot. His wife closed her eyes. Suddenly she spoke again. "What will you do about your new tour?" she demanded.

"Buy Iffley out."

"You mean you won't go on?"

"I will not."

"I don't intend to return to the stage either."

"It would not be fitting," decided Alaric. As always he managed to redirect the conversation towards himself. Anything else was unbearable to him. He was already beginning to develop the habit of closing down his attention upon any topic which did not directly concern himself, a faculty which in later years developed into a disease; so that ultimately he never replied coherently to any remark, unless it gave opportunity for self-discussion or boasting. He was even now evolving subconsciously a chain system of speech which led through a labyrinth of mental disorder, past any attention or relevancy, to a degree of inattention which insulted and bewildered any person who attempted to engage him in rational speech. But that fruited much later. For the moment he was merely abnormally egocentric.

"They will miss me," he said now. "I know of no other actor of my age who can render character parts and play juveniles as well with *my* skill."

Theodora ignored this and began planning a new gown.

"Moreover," embroidered Alaric, "they will have to pay more—far more—for infinitely inferior material. I was grossly underpaid!" He looked up and saw that he had lost his wife's attention. "Did I tell you of the time old Iffley came to me about a salary cut?"

"Yes, Allie," said his wife obediently. She had got to the laces on her dress.

"Well, damn it." Alaric's childish temper flared up shrilly. "Listen to me. I know plenty of other women who would be glad to hear me speak. 'Silver voiced' Annabella Anise called me. A lovely girl; she is much too much attracted to me, I fear—for her own good!"

Theodora checked upon her ribald commentary, realizing that, even this good fortune demanded ransom of some kind. "I am listening," she said wisely. "I always did think that woman was fascinated by you. You are a very fascinating man, Alaric."

Alaric smirked. "Mark you, there was nothing in it," he said, "nothing at all. . . . Shall we ring for a bottle of wine, Theo? I'm thirsty. It's been a trying day. . . ."

"By all means. Let Bilson know who is master of the house now!"

"Then oblige me, my love, by pulling the bell." Alaric smiled and sat firmly in his chair. His wife got off the bed, pulled the bell as requested, and rearranged herself and her flounces in a more decorous pose. Mabel knocked on the door.

Alaric said offensively, "Send Bilson here." His manner with servants was always wrong. He was either too familiar, or downright rude. His background and education had neither of them enlightened him that discourtesy was always most unforgivable when directed to any person more lowly placed than himself. He swung his monocle cord backwards and forwards and continued so doing when Bilson knocked and entered.

"What wine have we, Bilson?" he said negligently.

"Wine, Mr. Alaric?"

"Yes, wine. Red wine."

"We have some Burgundy, sir, and plenty of claret."

"What about champagne?" asked Theodora, propping herself on one elbow and looking at the butler.

"Yes, madam, we have champagne."

"Well, then, bring a bottle of claret and a bottle of champagne up here. Mind you bring the best—oh, and two glasses," said Alaric.

"Very good, sir," said Bilson, leaving the room at once.

"I'll show them," said Alaric triumphantly.

He had done so. But his disclosure had not been quite as he imagined. Bilson, pausing in the housekeeper's room to collect the keys of the cellar, confided in Mrs. Blossom, "The old 'un may have been common, but this one's a sight worse now he's come to power! Champagne and claret in 'is bedroom. Our reign is over, Mrs. Blossom. This will be no place for us *now*. We had best be looking out for new situations."

Alaric had indeed shown them!

* * * * *

Lady Dingleby was having her hair brushed. She sat before her dressing-table, her ravaged face reflected in the vast oval mirror, while Victoria brushed and rebrushed the faded straggling hair.

"How do you feel now, my lady; better I hope?" asked Victoria, after she had said, "Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred, change hands." She transferred the silver-backed brush from her left to her right hand and began brushing once more, moving her lips soundlessly as she resumed counting.

"Much better, thank you, Victoria. I can't tell you how thankful I am to have you with me entirely."

"If you are glad, my lady, I'm sure I'm honoured," said Victoria, stopping brushing for a moment, as she was unable to reply and count at the same time. "I said to Mrs. Blossom w'en she sent for me, my 'eart's going pitter-pat fit to burst its bonds and that's as true as I'm standing 'ere. Such good fortune is 'ardly to be borne, and me who 'ad never dreamed of haspiring to such a station."

" 'Lady's maid' does sound nice," agreed Lady Dingleby, "and you're a good girl, Victoria. Very likely you and I will be companions to each other. I am a lonely woman, Victoria." Her mouth quivered and the ever-ready tears began to flow once more.

"Now just you dry your eyes, my lady, and don't give such a thing another thought," consoled Victoria, whipping a clean lawn handkerchief from one of her capacious pockets. "If you'll presume to use one of my best . . ." and she held out the handkerchief.

Lady Dingleby dried her eyes. "I am very tired," she said weakly. "It has been such a terrible day."

Victoria began brushing once more, giving up all hope of counting on this auspicious occasion. "We'll have your hair done in a minute," she said cheerfully, "and put into two nice plaits. And then we'll give you a lovely bath, and pop you into bed with lots of pillows. Mrs. Blossom has spoke to cook and there'll be a tray ready and waiting, and then while you eat it I shall just sit quietly beside you and do some mending, and afterwards you shall tell me what you want to take with you in the morning, seeing as you are going to stay longer with Mrs. Foote than was at first expected." Victoria finished this protracted speech, sucked in her breath, and put down the hairbrushes. There was a knock at the door.

"Now who can that be?" she said. "Do you want to see anyone, my lady?"

"Oh, I don't know, I suppose . . . well . . . no . . . well that is . . . see who it is, Victoria."

Lady Dingleby wavering in her customary manner, Victoria went to the door. Her voice sounded in parley with another female voice.

"It's Mrs. Foote, my lady," she said, holding firmly on to the door-handle.

"Oh, yes; well, ask Mrs. Foote to come in, Victoria."

Victoria looked disapproving. "Will you come in, please, madam, but may I presume to tell you, madam, that her ladyship is very tired and is going to bed almost at once."

"You may," said Augusta Foote, walking resolutely into the room. "And I thoroughly approve, Victoria. I shall not keep her ladyship long."

Victoria registered approval also, read the signals aright, and went out of the door herself, closing it softly behind her.

"Well, Mama?" inquired Augusta, "do you feel up to talking for a few minutes? There are one or two things I would like to say to you, and I think they had better be said to-night." She sat down upon a chair near to the dressing-stool and arranged her dress. "It's about Alaric and Theodora."

Lady Dingleby sighed.

"Oh, don't think I'm going to make trouble. I think Theodora will do well enough. If she can manage Alaric. She's got a stony road ahead of her, poor girl."

"Amelia behaved disgracefully to her," said Lady Dingleby with sudden fire.

"Pooh, that was nothing! Only jealousy. Amelia needs a husband, and she hates and detests any woman of charm or attraction who comes within her vision. You know, Mama, with so much money behind her, Amelia might marry even now."

"Do you think such a thing possible, my dear?"

Augusta Foote laughed. "Poor Amelia, she is not very personable, is she?"

Lady Dingleby flinched. "Far be it from me to disparage one of my own children," she said unhappily.

"No one ever thought you did, but we're an unattractive lot. Now, Mama, don't put me off my subject. I have something important to say."

"Well, dear, and what is it?"

"Just this. You are coming away with me to-morrow morning. It is essential that you should get away from this house for a while; but it is not altogether wise for us to leave Alaric and Theodora here alone with Amelia without making some slight preparations before we leave."

Lady Dingleby looked at her daughter with foreboding. "What are you trying to tell me?" she said miserably.

"I'm going to ask you, first of all, to try very hard for a few minutes not to remonstrate with me for the things I shall say which you know in your heart are true. And I'm going to ask you to agree with what I have to suggest."

"What, before I know what it is?" Lady Dingleby was like a frightened child.

"No, of course not; afterwards."

"Very well, my dear. Pray tell me what you have in mind."

Augusta Foote rose and began pacing slowly back and forth across the thick carpet. "In the first place," she began, speaking slowly as if she were debating the words carefully before she uttered them, "Alaric is acquisitive. He is greedy, as a small boy is greedy; he wants to take and take—anything, everything; to stuff himself, even if he knows he will be sick afterwards, because he is incapable of looking forward logically, and he lives either in the immediate present or else in some ridiculous dream world of his own." She paused and took a couple of turns without speaking.

Then she went on. "I happened to be passing down the corridor some few moments ago and I encountered Bilson carrying a tray. I asked him where he was going and he said to Mr. Alaric's room. Now that tray, Mother, supported a bottle of champagne, a bottle of burgundy, and two glasses."

"In their bedroom?" gasped Lady Dingleby.

"Yes. Now that is not an unkind accusation of mine. That is mere fact. You are perfectly aware that Alaric cannot carry very much liquor. I don't know where he gets his weak head from, for Pa could contain almost any quantity of liquor and still remain upon his feet. However, there it is. We may be reasonably sure that Alaric will be feather-headed by dinner-time. By that time," she spoke slower than ever and paused in her perambulations, "I suggest that Bilson locks the wine cellar and despatches the key to Mr. Proberty's house, *on your instructions.* He may extract, if you wish, a certain reasonable quantity of liquor for general consumption, but you will be very foolish to go off and leave the keys where he may find them. Moreover, the servants are perfectly aware that Alaric has as much right as anyone to demand access to the wine cellar; but if you strike now, Bilson will very probably obey you."

"It seems a terrible thing to do," said Lady Dingleby. "I don't know, I'm sure . . . you must give me time to think it over . . . I can't decide at once. . . ."

Augusta Foote was evidently prepared for prevarications. She now said: "You think it over, Mama, while I'm talking. Now the next thing is this: Pa's personal possessions."

Lady Dingleby emitted a small cry. "Surely, Augusta, you don't think your brother would commit such an act of indelicacy as to touch your father's properties at such a time?"

"I do, Mother," said Mrs. Foote relentlessly, "and if you will do as I say and face facts, you will be forced to agree with me. Lock up Pa's rooms, and while you are about it, lock up the silver as well, and send the whole lot of keys down to Mr. Proberty's house together, and do it now before you have time to distress yourself by thinking about it for any length of time." Saying which, this purposeful woman crossed the room swiftly and pealed the bell.

Lady Dingleby set up a small fanfare of wails and protests. These Mrs. Foote ignored. When someone knocked on the door she opened it and said clearly, "Send Bilson here please, immediately."

Lady Dingleby continued to protest. Mabel, who had answered the bell, went hurrying down the back staircase and delivered her message breathlessly.

"Please, Mr. Bilson, you are to go to her ladyship's room at once. Mrs. Foote sent for you," and she stood and stared, while Bilson, nodding to Mrs. Blossom, said portentously, "I told you so," and went composedly out of the room.

Mrs. Foote admitted him to the bedroom. She said clearly, "Bilson, her ladyship has something to say to you," and she stood behind Lady Dingleby's chair like a statue while her mother faltered out:

"Bilson, I rely upon your discretion to do as I wish unquestioningly. Mrs. Foote regards my orders as being both necessary and confidential. May I rely upon you?" and the tired old woman looked appealingly at her manservant.

"I shall do my best to serve your ladyship at all times," said Bilson formally.

"Good," said Mrs. Foote.

"Then," faltered Lady Dingleby, "will you, please, go down to the wine cellar, remove to some other place such liquors as you would normally expect to use during two weeks or thereabouts, lock the cellar, and bring the keys to me."

"Very good, my lady," said Bilson without a quiver.

"Go on, Mother," prompted Augusta.

"Th . . . then go to Sir . . . Sir Josiah's private wing, lock up his dressing-room and study . . . and bring those keys to me also, with the keys of the silver cupboard."

"Is that all, my lady?"

She nodded. Augusta said, "Thank you, Bilson," and he went off to do as he was told.

"I'm sure I hope we may not regret this, Augusta," wailed the distraught widow.

"We should have regretted it if we hadn't," said her daughter tartly. "Now I shall send Victoria to you."

"No, wait until Bilson returns, if you please."

August nodded. "Very well—now what about your packing? Do you need any help?"

"None, I thank you. Victoria will pack for me. She has done so before."

There was an awkward pause. Both women listened for the sound of Bilson's knock.

Presently it came. He stepped into the room, handed over the five keys, and said, "The outer and inner doors of the cellar, my lady, the—er—two other keys, and the key of the silver cupboard."

Augusta reached for her reticule and took out an envelope. She withdrew a sheet of paper. "Read that, Mother, will you? No, don't go yet, Bilson."

Lady Dingleby read:

Dear Mr. Proberty, I enclose the keys of the wine cellar, my husband's dressing-room, and study, and the silver cupboard, and trust that you will consider I have acted wisely in sending these to you as I shall be absent from this house for the next two weeks or thereabouts."

Lady Dingleby looked up. "No explanation?" she queried.

"No explanation will be necessary, Mama."

Augusta led her mother over to her writing-desk and waited while she appended her signature. This blotted, Augusta folded the paper, slipped the keys between, slid all into the envelope, closed it, and sealed it with wax from the writing-table.

"Send one of the servants with this to Mr. Proberty's house without delay, please, Bilson," she said, handing the letter over.

"Very good, madam." Bilson was as impassive as ever. "Will that be all, madam?"

"Yes, thank you, Bilson; oh, no, Bilson, send Victoria to her ladyship. She does not feel very well, and wishes to go to bed."

CHAPTER VII

FOR the second time in one day Henry Truslove scratched upon the door of Mr. Heatherstead's study and was bade to enter. Prior to this, he had hung his hat and coat upon the hallstand, dropped his umbrella down beside the collection of umbrellas and walking-sticks in the carved elephant's hoof which did duty for an umbrella stand, smoothed down his long jacket, twitched at his narrow trousers, and fiddled with his tie. Only then did he consider himself prepared for the afternoon's work.

"Come in," shouted Mr. Heatherstead.

Henry went in and climbed upon his high stool. Mr. Heatherstead was seated at his desk scribbling rapidly, a smouldering pipe lay before him in a nest of disordered papers. The tassel of his cap dangled perilously over his left eyebrow.

"Ah, Henry," he said, without looking up, "kindly hand me the map of this town."

Henry obliged, taking a large roll of paper from a corner. This he unfolded and awaited his employer's pleasure.

"Give it here—how did the funeral go? Enjoy yourself?"

Henry pursed up his lips. "The funeral was impressive, sir," he said with dignified restraint. "The floral tributes were quite exceptional."

"Ha," said Mr. Heatherstead, taking up the pipe and replacing it between his teeth. "Well, now, look here," he grabbed the map and spread it out before him. "Just you find the descriptive passage on the town among your papers and compare with me upon the stated locations in order that there shall be no error."

Henry returned to his stool and Mr. Heatherstead traced an uneven passage over the map with a nicotine-stained forefinger.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, fire away."

Henry obeyed. "Easterbridge town," he read, "which is featured in the Domesday Book, is situate upon the two slopes of a hill and dominated by Easterbridge Castle, the family residence of the Dukes of Eston. Although certain additions have been made to the present Castle, the architecture is mainly Norman and the tall keep towers above the town, the whole presenting a superb example of early English architecture in mellowed grey stone. Notable among the Norman remains are the East Towers, the Drawbridge, and the 'Motte,' of which further details are enumerated elsewhere. Situated as it is upon an eminence, the Castle commands a

splendid view from the north of the willow-fringed River Este, which flows through the grounds and onwards to bisect the main street, Eastgate Street, where it is spanned by the picturesque River Bridge built during the twelfth century."

"Pray continue," grunted Mr. Heatherstead.

Henry went on, "By the side of this bridge stands the 'Coronet Theatre.' This building, though small in extent, sufficiently affords all the accommodation required; and, though humble in its external appearance, is neatly and conveniently fitted up within. The character of the performers is, in general, nearly the same as that of most of those who tread the boards of a provincial theatre. But not infrequently some of the more eminent actors on the British stage have condescended to display their talents on this humbler scene."

Mr. Heatherstead looked up. "I wonder," he asked, "if we should state to which hand it lies upon, even though it would mean saying left if one faces south or right if one faces north . . . now I wonder?"

Henry waited while Mr. Heatherstead wondered to his full.

"No," he decided finally, "I think not. Pray proceed."

"The Public Library, which faces the Coronet Theatre and is supported by annual subscription, boasting membership of over one hundred, was first established in the year 1799.

"Passing over the bridge, and thus advancing onwards, the traveller is conscious of being among a district comprising several good and some handsome houses of predominantly Georgian architecture. Which in their turn along the pleasant way give place to the town's spacious and elegantly disposed gardens, and thence the course is pursued out of the town into the surrounding beautiful countryside.

"Upon the other side of the bridge lies the town proper . . ."

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes," Mr. Heatherstead cut short his clerk's dilation, "that will do very well. We now contain ourselves solely with the south side, is that not so?"

"Yes, Mr. Heatherstead."

"Then we do very well and may compare with this map at leisure, as we dilate upon the residential quarters and the 'shopping centre.' For the moment pray let us return to the theatre, upon which I have further to append. Here you will find my notes. Take from them directly, and as you transcribe each sheet, be good enough to let me peruse it immediately in search of any possible error in style or punctuation."

Henry received the unsorted shuffle of papers from the speaker who drew them out pell-mell from beneath the map and handed them over like a recently shuffled, but still unsorted, pack of playing cards.

The room became silent, except for the scratching of Henry's pen.

* * * * *

While Mr. Heatherstead concerned himself with further dilations upon the Coronet Theatre, and Henry transcribed the notes which had already been made for him that day, in another part of the town, enfoldingly

described by Mr. Heatherstead as "residential," a female lodger at a boarding-house in Southhall Lane was inquiring of her landlady in sprightly tones the whereabouts of that self-same theatre.

Having received the necessary directions, she adjusted her feather hat, fastened the collar of her sealskin cape closer about her throat and set out upon her way, picking delicately over the slush-puddled pavements in button-booted safety.

As she advanced towards Eastgate Street she paused to examine a play-bill which adorned a bare space of wall upon the corner.

Mr. Louie Levanthall's select company of ladies and gentlemen present for three nights only the moving drama entitled A Bunch of Violets, *with Miss Annabelle Anise and Mr. Roderick Wells. Seats sixpence, one shilling and two and sixpence. Performances nightly at seven.*

"I'm not in large enough type!" Miss Anise decided, when she had finished reading the playbill. "I must speak to Louie, once and for all."

With this purpose in mind she continued upon her way. She was an attractive creature, fair, rather unusually slender by the standard of her time, with pale, clear skin, as yet unspoiled by the ravages of grease-paint, a soft, full mouth, and fine, blue eyes. She was not very tall. She attracted a certain amount of attention as she made her way through the town, and at length, after pausing before the bridge, and looking uncertainly to left and right, she went round to the side of the theatre and pushed open the stage door.

Inside, all was bleak and uninviting. Green-edged stone steps winding upwards, green-painted stone walls—a hollow, echoing sound following upon her footsteps and a hollow, echoing sound coming from behind a swing-door at the top of the first short flight of steps. She pushed open this door, and looked along the narrow stone corridor which ran away to left and right. From the left came the hollow sound which was not from her footsteps. It came from the stage, where, apparently, the rehearsal for *A Bunch of Violets* had already started. The company had previously rehearsed for ten days in London, and were now occupied in their final three days of rehearsing upon the stage of the theatre in which they would open upon the following Monday night.

Annabelle Anise went towards the stage. A single float was burning. The small auditorium was shrouded and dark; dimly she could discern a couple of figures in the front row of seats. On the stage, Roderick Wells was declaiming one of his more impassioned speeches to an elderly woman with an obvious wig.

"Is that you, Anna?" came a voice from the front row. "All right, Mr. Wells, hold it a minute, please."

"Yes, I'm here," said Annabelle, stepping out under the single light.

"Well, oblige me, my dear, by coming down here a moment. I have something to say to you." Mr. Louie Levanthall shouted his request from the stalls.

Annabelle picked up her skirts and went down the steps behind the door marked "Private" which gave access to "the front."

"All right, Roderick, on you go," shouted Mr. Levanthall again. Annabelle joined the speaker and sat down beside him.

Mr. Levanthall, who was thin in every characteristic, hair, limbs, voice, features, began whispering to her behind his hand.

"Know who lives in this town?"

"Not particularly."

"A *great* friend of yours."

"Really?"

"It's true."

"Well, who is it?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No, I'm sure I can't."

"Doesn't the name Alaric have any meaning for you?"

"Not Alaric Dingleby?"

"No other."

"Well, I had no idea!"

"I seemed to remember he said something about it. I made some inquiries. Appears his father died suddenly and was buried this morning. I had it in mind to pay him a call, but it would hardly be decent for a day or two."

"Oh, no."

"Seems a pity, doesn't it?"

Annabelle's tone became very light. "Oh, I don't know. It would have been nice to have seen him. I liked playing with him, I admit."

"I wonder if his old boy left him anything?" Louie had an eye to the main chance as always.

"Would it mean anything to you?"

"It might mean a lot to both of us," said Louie meaningly, "if you happened to want to play your cards properly."

"Shush. Mr. Ball will hear you!" Annabelle glanced anxiously at the stage manager who sat next to Louie.

"Of course he won't."

"Well, I'd rather not discuss it here."

"All right." Louie Levanthall rose to his feet as Roderick closed his small scene with the lady who wore a wig. "Half an hour's break everyone," he shouted. "Half an hour, mind. No more!" He tucked his hand under Annabelle's arm. "Come along over the Bridge Tavern; they're bound to have a Cosy. Then we can talk in peace."

"I'm sure I'd much rather stay here," said Annabelle emphatically.

"Nonsense, you be a sensible girl. Now come along." Louie tugged at her arm.

Annabelle allowed herself to be borne away, led across the road to the Bridge Tavern which, rather unsuitably, adjoined the Public Library, and here she soon found herself installed in the Snug with Mr. Leventhall, a glass of porter and a wineglassful of port—her own libation.

"Now," said Mr. Levanthall, taking a long pull at the porter, "what do you say?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," said Annabelle, sipping her port.

"Just this." Mr. Levanthall leaned forward and spoke emphatically, poking out his long, thin nose and waving his long, thin hands. "Say we leave things for a day or two and then you go and call on Alaric. Or, if you prefer, send him a note and ask him to come and see you. He'll come. He never refuses an invitation from anyone."

"Thank you, I'm sure," said Annabelle, bridling.

"Now don't take on, Anna, there's a good girl. *You* know what I mean. Then just supposing while you're with him I drop in and mention accidentally that I have a production in mind—Shakespeare—Alaric always was a mug for Shakespeare—with you as my leading lady . . . and all we need is a bit of capital. I think he'll fall for it right away. Then a bit for me, and a bit for you, finish a short tour with *The Violets* and go into rehearsal. A nice salary for you, besides the pickings, and everything comfortable and easy. You'll be bound to know if his father *has* left him anything. He never could keep anything to himself for five minutes —now what do you say?"

Annabelle sipped her port in silence. She was twenty-three. She had been on the stage as long as she could remember. She had been relatively selective. Therefore she had not gone very far. Admittedly she was playing "leads," but three night stands, provincial third-rate towns were not much to show for more than ten years' work and one didn't get younger, she was bound to admit! Alaric was attractive—to her—that in itself was something. If it meant better parts as well—and better dates—well, she would be playing with a man she didn't dislike, bettering her position by so doing—and she felt perfectly sure that she was capable of managing Alaric into any position that she required—either intimate or otherwise.

"Very well," she said slowly, laying down her empty glass.

"Capital!" exclaimed Mr. Levanthall, rubbing his hands. He called for more drinks and enlarged upon his theme.

"Now, say you write him a nice note. This very day. Strike while the iron's hot has always been my motto. We'll send it round and take care of the rest when the time comes."

"What sort of a note?" asked Annabelle, frowning.

"Oh, er, something about hearing the sad news . . . very sorry indeed. Hoping to renew a pleasant acquaintance . . . feel reluctant to intrude at such a time . . . wondered as you will be here till next Wednesday if he would feel inclined to drop round at the theatre any time . . . sure of a warm welcome . . . other friends here . . . you know the sort of thing . . ."

"Yes, I think I know," said Annabelle, her frown clearing. . . . "Please ask them here if they can oblige me with a pen and some paper."

Two hours later the letter was on its way to "Laurelston," by the hand of a small boy whom Mr. Levanthall enriched with sixpence, and that gentleman and his leading lady were once more deep in the rehearsal which had been halted temporarily.

Bilson received the note, and weighed it thoughtfully in his hands after he had closed the door upon the whistling infant. He pondered the advisability of taking it immediately to Mr. Alaric's room. Mr. Alaric was engaged with his wife, the claret and the champagne. These things demand thought. Moreover, Lady Dingleby had only just completed her instructions regarding certain house keys.

Bilson made his decision. He laid the letter upon the marble table in the hall and went back to his own quarters.

Amelia was the first to see the note. She came downstairs a few minutes after the gold clock in the hall chimed seven. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but except for this evidence of her emotional outburst against Theodora, she was composed. She paused before the marble table and read the superscription on the note. The florid handwriting, adorned with squirls and squiggles proclaimed Alaric Dingleby, Esquire. Private and personal! Amelia sniffed. "A woman's handwriting," she decided. Her hand hovered above the note. Then a sound disturbed her, and she straightened up and went across the hall to the drawing-room with her head in the air. Bilson's features creased into a faint smile as he watched her. Bilson was enjoying his position as privileged spectator of the Dingleby dramas.

He savoured the possible ramifications of the situation as he and Mabel put the finishing touches to the dinner-table. Four covers were laid. Four sherry glasses—four claret glasses—four liqueur glasses—very little brandy in the decanter—half a bottle of claret—a few inches of sherry.

Mabel drove the tightly clustered stems of freesias further into the branched glasses of the épergne and began a conversation.

"Lots of changes coming here, Mr. Bilson," she said demurely.

"Very possibly, Mabel."

"We were wondering in the kitchen, Mr. Bilson, if you and Mrs. Blossom would take kindly to them?"

"Time will show," said Bilson austerely.

"You could have knocked me down with a feather I was that surprised to hear of her ladyship taking Victoria to be her personal maid."

"Victoria 'as always been a favourite with her ladyship," said Bilson, not disclosing what vibrations of surprise he experienced at the news.

Mabel tried again. "We in the kitchen had it in mind that the late master would have left you more money than what he did."

"Human nature is full of disappointments," said Bilson with a touch more warmth, "human nature is a source of disappointment to me. I am a student of human nature."

After this surprising burst of confidence he picked up his silver tray, said sharply, "Your serviette was far from spotless at luncheon to-day, Mabel. Kindly see that it does not occur again," and left the dining-room.

Fifteen minutes later he sounded the gong.

* * * * *

"Theresh the dinner bell," said Alaric thickly.

Theodora, who was applying a hare's-foot to her face said clearly, "Allie, I advise you to put your head under the cold tap. You need to have your wits about you in this house for the next few hours."

Mrs. Foote was going down the stairs wearing a black watered silk skirt with a long-sleeved bodice of black net, ornamented tastefully with black *passementerie*.

Alaric replied to his wife's implied criticism, "Perfectly sober," he said, swaying slightly, "feel rather hot though," and he lurched through to the bathroom.

Theodora, whose head was stronger, surveyed her face with over-bright eyes, stood up, and pinned a jet ornament into the bodice of her dress. She had worn it recently on the stage as *The Young Widow of Lammerdale* and considered it highly suitable. They were both late. By the time they left their rooms, Bilson was saying to the two black-clad ladies in the dining-room, "Cook presents her compliments and wishes to know if she should hold dinner back," and Mrs. Foote replied briskly, "Certainly not, bring the soup," so that Theodora and Alaric came in as the soup tureen went out.

Alaric, steadied by his part immersion in cold water, was feeling vaguely sick. Augusta Foote braced herself for a difficult meal and Amelia crumbled her bread without speaking.

Bilson held Theodora's chair back and said deferentially, "Will you take soup, madam?"

"No thank you, nor will Mr. Dingleby."

"Here, steady—who says I won't. Bring me some soup, Bilson, by all means."

Augusta raised her eyebrows and began making conversation. "How do you feel, Theodora; rested, I trust?"

"Perfectly, I thank you. How is Mama?"

"She has retired to bed."

Amelia said nothing and contrived to make everyone else feel remarkably ill at ease. Augusta's fingers itched to give her a good slapping.

"You will be glad to return to your little daughter, no doubt?" said Theodora, addressing her sister-in-law. "I confess I am dying to meet her."

"You like children?" said Mrs. Foote, surprised.

"I dote on them," said Theodora.

Her husband laughed. "See what we can do to oblige you," he said coarsely.

The ladies shivered. Alaric finished his soup noisily and left his sherry untasted. He still felt distinctly queasy. Bilson removed it and proffered fish.

"Geraldine," said Mrs. Foote, "is an interesting child. Very excited when I left at the prospect of seeing her dear grandmama."

Theodora digested this and translated the words into a reminder to herself that Geraldine was at present the only grandchild and thus well

favoured in respect of Lady Dingleby's bequests when that lady should pass on to meet her Maker. "Has she a governess?" she inquired.

"Not until she is five. She has a nurse at present, and a nursemaid; later I hope to find a trustworthy Frenchwoman, a friend of mine has such a person in mind, nearly at the end of her time with the twin girls of a relative."

Bromides floated back and forth across the table. With the advent of the sweet, Alaric pushed back his chair and left the room. Theodora looked after his retreating figure uncertainly and Mrs. Foote watched her. For an instant the bride's composure wavered, then she took hold of herself firmly and permitted Bilson to serve her. Presently Mrs. Foote said, "We will take coffee in the drawing-room, Bilson," and looked expectantly at Theodora, who picked up her cue and rose immediately with an eagerness to have done with this unbearable meal which was pitifully evident.

There was no sign of Alaric. He was not in the hall. Theodora murmured, "Excuse me a moment," and went to the library. He was not there. She hurried up the stairs. . . . Alaric was not in his room. She returned to the drawing-room as Mabel set down the coffee tray.

"Mabel, have you seen Mr. Dingleby?" she asked unwisely.

Amelia looked up with ferret eyes, redly triumphant. "I expect he's gone out," she said, speaking for the first time. "I expect he's gone in answer to the note. It is no longer in the hall." After which she decided retreat was advisable and hurried out of the room.

"What note?" Theodora looked baffled.

"I will inquire of Bilson, madam," said Mabel.

"I can't understand it," said Theodora.

Mrs. Foote looked at her. "Perhaps, dear, he just took a turn to clear his head. He hasn't a very good head, you know. It's really not his fault."

Mabel returned. "Bilson says, madam, that a note was left here for Mr. Dingleby. Bilson placed it on the hall table. Mr. Dingleby took the note when he left the dining-room and went out a few moments later."

"Thank you," managed Theodora, stifling a desire to scream. She drank her coffee without tasting it and the words Mrs. Foote uttered fell upon deaf ears. In a sudden surge of hatred and discomfort Theodora was wishing herself anywhere but caught in the toils of this unpredictable family, and wishing herself anywhere but where she was. At the same time, she was realizing that there was nothing she could do about it, having, by marriage, placed the chains about her own wrists and finding that she must endure their chafing without outward complaint if her position was to be in any way endurable.

It was some hours later before the implication of Mrs. Foote's remark, "Perhaps he took a turn to clear his head," became dully disclosed to her. How did Augusta know his head was fuddled? What fetching and carrying of information went on among these people? How did Augusta know of the champagne and the claret which had been carried to their

bedroom? . . . these questions eddied round within her mind distressfully. She lay awake, with the gas humming in the silent room and thought until her head ached. Alaric did not return until very late.

* * * * *

Alaric was, in many ways, quite childlike. Particularly in respect of memory. Unpleasant experiences passed from his consciousness as rapidly as a sound slap passes from the mind of a child of four or five. So it was with his father's funeral. It had been unpleasant. It was over. For him it was already forgotten. Therefore as he lurched from the dining-room and saw the note, he picked it up and read it, accepting only such part of it as was welcome to him—the part which dwelt upon Annabelle's anticipated pleasure at a reunion. The carefully worded phrases which embraced condolence on his bereavement, and dropped hints that the writer fully expected a lapse of time before this happy event should come about, were ignored—or rather forgotten as soon as read. Moreover, now that Alaric had married his Theodora—of whom he had dilated rapturously before he possessed the lady—he was as bored with her as any spoilt infant who screams for another new toy to add to a vast collection—and on possession tires of it almost instantly and screams for another. Therefore it was the work of a moment to catch up his rather absurd black cape from the downstairs cloakroom, swing it about his shoulders, cram a wide-brimmed hat on his head, open the front door and tread out upon the snow in his thin, patent-leather pumps. He gave as little consideration to his clothing, unless it was exhibitionist, as he did to the feelings of others. The sharp walk cleared his head—so much so that he was perfectly sober once again by the time he reached the stage door, just as Annabelle was coming into the wings after the curtain fell upon Act II.

"Annabelle," Alaric exclaimed, coming up the steps to the stage level and meeting her on her way to the dressing-rooms.

"Alaric—er—Mr. Dingleby," replied Annabelle, flinging out two shapely and wet-whited arms, "what brings you here so soon?"

Alaric ignored this and began complimenting the lady upon her looks.

"Come to my dressing-room," she said hurriedly. "I'm not on again for over half an hour—but, of course, you know the play!"

"Ah," said Alaric sadly, "how the familiar atmosphere tempts me!"

He fell in behind her and they moved along the narrow corridor to No. 1 dressing-room.

A weary-looking dresser was hanging garments on an improvised rail.

"Timmy, just run off and tell Mr. Levanthall there's an old friend of his here, will you—and then fetch some porter from the 'Tavern.' "

Annabelle sat down before her mirror and began touching up her face. She was a little surprised underneath all her extravagance at such a prompt visit and a little anxious not to overplay her hand. "I was so sorry to hear of your loss," she said.

"Ah, yes!" Alaric remembered his father with some annoyance. "A

terrible time, my dear. I felt the warmth of your note bringing me alive again. I think I was temporarily numbed, you know. Grief sometimes has that effect upon the sensitive."

"How well I know, my dear." She turned around on her stool, which was a small packing-case, and patted his hand which waved conveniently within reach. "We shall not speak of it again. Just a little friendly talk and a gossip about old times. You will be going back into rehearsal again soon, surely? That is the best possible thing for you. For an experienced trouper like yourself."

She waited rather breathlessly for his reply and began to polish her nails. Alaric changed his expression to one of deep mystery—dropped his voice a couple of tones and said:

"It is not possible for me to return to the theatre."

"What's that I hear, my old friend?" said Louie Levanthall, coming in fortuitously, "not returning to the theatre? My dear fellow! . . . an irreparable loss, not to be thought of . . . never heard such a thing . . . with fame and the golden path of glory stretching out before you . . ." He stopped speaking and put his head on one side like a bird to view the effect of his words.

Alaric looked enchanted. "My dear Louie," he said, acting madly and continuing to look mournful, "I assure you . . . the changes in my position demand it of me."

Louie darted a swift glance at the mirror and Annabelle nodded. "So he has got some money!"

"I can't believe an actor of your merit could ever desert the stage permanently," Louie said firmly, "couldn't be done. Art is stronger than duty—and just now when I had a proposition in mind . . . I am most upset . . . starring you, *of course* . . . however, if your mind is made up there's nothing to be said about it. Just tell me one thing (I must get back in front, you know), do I congratulate you or condole with you on this change? I can't be glad myself, I feel the loss too deeply, but if you are happy, my friend."

Alaric sat down on the only chair in the room to think this out. At length he said, "How well you know me, Louie. No, I am not happy. But I must do my duty to my family and my wife."

"Wife?" shrieked his friends in chorus.

"Oh, yes, my wife. I was married—er—quite recently."

Louie Leventhall did some expertly swift thinking. He accepted the phrase "quite recently," added to it his opinion of a bridegroom who should come out alone on the day of his father's funeral leaving his bride alone, and decided that all was far from lost. He therefore came forward, wrung Alaric by the hand and gave him his most earnest congratulations. Annabelle did likewise and said tenderly, "Alaric, may I give the bridegroom a sisterly kiss in honour of the occasion?" and then rapidly suited action to words. Alaric took the gift with considerable appreciation. Levanthal murmured, "This means you must wait until after the show in order that we can drink to your bride" and whisked himself out of the

room as the dresser scurried back with three glasses and two bottles of porter.

"I beg your pardon, m'm," she said, seeing the embrace at full height. She then popped down the drinks and fled.

Annabelle stood back. "Fancy you married . . . well . . .! Do I know the lucky woman?"

"Theodora La Valle," said Alaric flatly.

"Five minutes, Miss Anise," shouted the call-boy, clattering past her door. There was no more time at present.

"You will stay, won't you?" said Annabelle, returning to her dressing-table. She shouted, "Timmy, come in and change me," and began unhooking her own skirt, saying, "Dear Theo," in tones of silky venom.

"I really shouldn't," said Alaric.

"Nonsense, go out in front and see the rest of the show. Come back here afterwards. I only wish you were playing opposite me; Roderick is *so* unfeeling. He gives me nothing. Absolutely nothing!"

"Who's that, Roderick Wells?"

"Yes."

Timmy was dropping the Act III dress over her charge's head.

"No feeling," said Alaric, taking sharp turns about the room with his cloak flapping, "no feeling at all. At least in my opinion."

Annabelle's head emerged about the dress. "I quite agree," she said as the door opened.

Roderick Wells came in. "Are you ready, Anna? Oh, hello, Dingleby, see you after the show." He held the door open for his leading lady, who wrenched herself away from the dresser as the last hook was fastened, caught up her fan, said, "Coming, darling—see you later, Alaric," and dashed out of the room, leaving Alaric, the dresser, and the porter alone together. Alaric drank two glasses of the porter and went out to see the show.

* * * * *

Theodora lay wearily on the bed. For a long time she endured the hissing of the gas. Finally she extinguished the light and lay in the darkness watching the patterns on the ceiling made by the dancing fire. She was wondering if Alaric's expectations had justified her own.

* * * * *

The brougham came round at ten on the following morning. Lady Dingleby fluttered about in the hall delaying her departure and driving Mrs. Foote to distraction by so doing.

"If they haven't taken the trouble to come down and see you off, Mama, leave them alone," she advised, exasperated.

"Oh, but I think I should . . . after all, my own daughter-in-law . . . she may be indisposed. Then, again, Augusta, I might write them a note?"

"You have no time to write notes, Mama. I beg of you get into the

carriage or we shall miss our train. Victoria, take your seat, her ladyship is just coming."

Bilson said formally, "May I wish your ladyship a pleasant journey, and you, too, madam?" and he held open the door inexorably.

Lady Dingleby regarded it, the steps beyond, the waiting carriage, the fidgeting horses, the groom at the carriage door and the coachman on the box. "Oh, dear," she said, "oh, dear me, well, if you think, Augusta . . . I'm sure I don't know."

"Mama, *come along.*" Augusta Foote took hold of her mother's arm and propelled the distressed lady towards the carriage, enduring immovably the final spate of "Oh dears" and "well you know really" . . . until at length the widow was bestowed in the carriage facing the horses, her bandbox at her feet, her daughter opposite her, and with a rattle of harness and a scuffling of hoofs, the equipage rolled forward and finally disappeared from sight.

Bilson closed the door, went straightway to the "lower regions," closed himself in Mrs. Blossom's room, removed his jacket and said with deep foreboding, "Mark my words, Mrs. Blossom, there's trouble ahead—for all of us."

Amelia Dingleby had eaten a solitary breakfast in the dining-room before the arrival of her mother and sister. When they came in she said good-bye to them both with frigid dislike and rustled off to her room, where she remained throughout the day.

At last Theodora and Alaric had the house to themselves.

* * * * *

It was unfortunate for Annabelle Anise and Louie Levanthall that they had decided jointly to withhold from postulating their scheme on the evening of their reunion with Alaric. Levanthall's Jewish caution, overriding for once his ever-present desire to "strike while the iron is hot," had prompted him to hiss at Annabelle in the brief instant they had had alone together before repairing to the "Tavern," "Leave it for to-night." The instinct had been wise enough, in theory. They needed another council together to review the unexpected complication of Alaric's marriage, nevertheless their knowledge of him was not profound enough for them to realize to the full his weather-cock mind.

On the walk down to the theatre, Alaric had been a schoolboy escaping from the strictures of his guardians. On the return, fortified by flattery, invigorated by adulation and refreshed sufficiently by the little performance he had played that night "off the stage," he was returning home in a reversed humour which presented his present circumstances once more in an eminently favourable light. He was therefore pleasant to his wife, who awoke anticipating a scene and was delighted to find him sober—and his presentation of the evening's events gave her no cause for complaint.

"I had an urgent note from Levanthall," he said. "I went down, thinking the company might be in trouble. I found the cause was nothing more than a desire on Annabelle's part (a very natural desire) to see me

again. I told them of our marriage. They insisted on my joining them for supper after the show—as you know I ate little here and was hungry by that time—and after supper I left, not promising to return."

So much for the theatre—for the moment. In the morning both husband and wife took the line of least resistance by tacit agreement, and remained abed until the travellers were departed. They then arose, and with the best will in the world, towards themselves, set about exploring the house.

CHAPTER VIII

"OLD PROBERTY," Alaric told Theodora, as they strolled down the corridor from their bedroom, "asked me to hang about for a few days. He wants my advice over some matters concerning the estate. I think I shall go down to see him this afternoon. I want some money, I have already spoken about that, and then, at the same time, I can find out what he wants from me. The sooner we can get away from here for a while the better. My nerves are quite frayed." Here he paused and gave his wife's person a firm pinch. "I don't suppose Mrs. Dingleby will be averse to doing a little shopping in London, do you?"

Mrs. Dingleby answered suitably and then broached the matter which more nearly concerned her at the moment.

"Which rooms are we going to have?" she asked. "You know I don't really know this house. Supposing we send for Mrs. Blossom, then she can conduct me. I want to explore everything from attic to cellar."

"Always excepting Amelia's room," chuckled Alaric. "Well, let's go down and fetch Mrs. Blossom, then you can see the kitchen and cellars. I want to have a look at the old man's wine store myself. May as well do the thing thoroughly."

Mrs. Blossom was taking her morning cocoa. Bess, the kitchen-maid, surprised in the passage and informed of their errand, turned herself into a running footman and brought the news breathlessly, omitting to knock upon the door and bursting in unceremoniously upon the housekeeper and butler.

Mrs. Blossom half rose from her chair, coloured hotly, and sat back again, saying, "Let them come, and you, Bess, kindly remember to knock when you enter my room."

Bilson reached for his jacket and hitched himself into it hastily. Bess withdrew, goggle-eyed, and was back in the kitchen with the other servants in time to see the entry of the new master. There was a scraping of chairs and a rustling of starched aprons. Theodora took the reins. "Please sit down everyone," she said calmly, "Mr. Alaric and I are not stopping." And with a quick glance about her, she stepped up to the housekeeper's room and knocked on the door. Alaric appraised Bess who was standing flat against the wall as if they were royalty.

"Come in," said Mrs. Blossom.

Theodora did so. "So sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Blossom," she said,

"but, as you probably know, I am unfamiliar with many parts of this house. I would like you to show me round, and then I can select the rooms I shall require for my own use."

Mrs. Blossom evidently experienced some surprise at the pleasant tone. She said quietly, "I understand perfectly, madam. If you will just permit me to collect my keys, I will attend you." She proffered her own chair and Theodora sat down.

"While we're about it you may as well bring the cellar keys, Bilson." Alaric lounged in the doorway.

"I regret, sir, that is impossible," said Bilson respectfully.

It was Alaric's turn to colour hotly. "Why not, indeed?" he said sharply.

"Because, sir, I have not got them. Mr. Proberty has them."

Alaric's eyes narrowed. There was tension in the little room. "Since when?" he demanded. "You had them yesterday when I sent for champagne."

"Yes, sir, I had," agreed Bilson, while Mrs. Blossom took a large bunch of keys from her desk.

"Well, who sent them to Mr. Proberty?"

There was no reply to his question. Bilson looked uncomfortable. Finally Mrs. Blossom took a hand. "Her ladyship sent for Bilson late yesterday afternoon, Mr. Alaric—she requested certain keys to be delivered to her room, and they were despatched by hand to Mr. Proberty."

"What do you mean, certain keys? The cellar keys?"

"And the keys of the late master's rooms and the keys of the silver cupboard," said Mrs. Blossom softly.

Alaric's face was congested. His mouth worked. He put up an unsteady hand to veil its twitching.

Theodora's voice, perfectly composed, was like water pouring across a conflagration. "Would that be something to do with death duties and the recording of values, Mrs. Blossom?" she inquired.

"I expect so, madam. In fact, Bilson said as much to me himself."

Bilson looked at her in an astonished manner and recovered his poise almost at once. "That was my conjecture," he managed.

Alaric's face cleared slightly. "Very well. You did no more than your duty. I am seeing Mr. Proberty this afternoon," he said loftily, endeavouring to conceal the storm of rage which had shaken him. "We need not discuss it further." He turned to his wife. "Go over the rooms down here with Mrs. Blossom, Theo. Meet me in the library." He turned away from the door and they heard his footsteps fading down the long passage. Mrs. Blossom folded her hands across her bosom. "I am ready when you are, madam."

"Will you lead the way, Mrs. Blossom, I will follow you. I do not know my way about."

Mrs. Blossom inclined her head and rustled forward, and Bilson, left alone, withdrew a large handkerchief and mopped his brow. He then sat down to write a letter. Upstairs in the library, Alaric was similarly engaged.

Bilson wrote:

To Mr. Proberty,

Dear Sir,

As I was engaged by the late Sir Josiah and Lady Dingleby, and her ladyship is now away, I trust that I am doing right in submitting my notice to you in her ladyship's absence. I wish to terminate my service here one month from to-day, and trust that you will accept my notice on behalf of her ladyship, Lady Dingleby. I will be obliged if you will ask her ladyship for a reference for me.

Your obedient servant,

JAMES BILSON.

Alaric wrote swiftly in a large scrawling hand across half a page, signed it, and put the sheet under a blotter hastily as his wife came into the room.

"Now, my love," he said good-humouredly, "where shall Mrs. Blossom and I escort you?"

"I want no rooms on the ground floor," said Theodora, "I want rooms upstairs."

They went upstairs together and Mrs. Blossom opened doors for them.

"You say my father's rooms are locked, Mrs. Blossom."

"Yes, sir."

"Surely the room next to mine is unoccupied?" queried Theodora. They were standing at the head of the main staircase. To the left ran the locked rooms, immediately before them was Lady Dingleby's room, with Amelia's adjoining it. The corridor wound away into the distance like a riband of gloomy tunnelling.

"Permit me to show you the empty rooms, madam," said Mrs. Blossom. "This is one of the principal bedrooms." She opened the door and disclosed a large room dominated by a gaunt, four-poster bed, a vast wardrobe, and several pieces of expensive lacquer. The wallpaper was floral, darkly festooned with leaves and branches and improbable flowers, interspersed with sickly birds of gaudy plumage. Theodora shivered. She crossed to the windows and drew back the heavy hangings. Outside the terraced garden lay beneath its shroud of snow, with only the ornamental stone figures uprising above the whiteness.

"It's a nice big room," suggested Mrs. Blossom.

Theodora pointed to a door set in the wall at right angles to the window. "Where does that lead to?"

"Another room, madam."

"Kindly unlock it."

Alaric began playing with the drawers of the lacquer cabinet. The newly opened door disclosed another large room, furnished with a large, glossy brass bedstead, and a vast suite of some unfamiliar wood highly varnished and of a sickly yellow colouring. Theodora mused, standing in

the doorway, looking from one room to the other. "Alaric, come here."

Alaric stopped playing with the cabinet.

"Supposing we used these two rooms. This one for our bedroom and this one for my bewdoir."

Alaric nodded disinterestedly. "I say, Mrs. Blossom, I think I should like this lacquer in my sitting-room. Where can I have a sitting-room?"

"If madam is satisfied with these two rooms for herself, why not take your present bedroom for a sitting-room, sir?"

"Whatever do you want a sitting-room for, Alaric?" inquired Theodora, awakening from her lacy, frilly dreams.

"I want a studio," said Alaric with emphasis.

"A studio?"

Alaric nodded. "A studio," he repeated, rolling the words over his tongue. "Have I never told you I was an artist?"

"You did mention it," said Theodora rather weakly.

Mrs. Blossom intervened. "If you are interested, madam," she said with great diplomacy, "I can show you several of Mr. Alaric's canvases. They are stored away carefully. At one time, before Mr. Alaric went on the stage, we in the kitchen all thought art would be his master."

Alaric shot his wife a glance of mingled triumph and defiance. "It may yet be my master, Mrs. Blossom," he remarked, eyeing the lacquer cabinet once again. Only he knew what dreams of interior decoration were inspired by the black and gold and red at which he stared.

"Very well," said Theodora, "you will have our present bedroom for a studio, and I shall have these two rooms. Is that settled?"

"Oh, no," said Alaric, shocked by such precipitous decision, "we must consider the other rooms first. Come, Mrs. Blossom, let us continue."

They went from room to room, eyeing vast pieces of furniture, staring upon picture-bespattered wastes of gaudy wallpapers, the "homely" choice of the deceased knight, the Mecca of his ambition and selection; but they returned to the first three rooms. Moreover, if, as Mrs. Blossom suggested, they were prepared to make certain changes, the bathroom, which at present led from their bedroom, could easily be transformed into a nice dressing-room for a gentleman and what could be more convenient than a dressing-room and studio which led one from the other?

Finally, in high good humour, Alaric repaired to the library once more and began writing a lengthy list in green ink which commenced, "Studio, Buddar" (Alaric's spelling was never his strong point), "Chinese panels, Oriental lamps," and wound rapidly down over the whole of one page, and was in fact well over half-way down the second by the time his wife returned to the library proclaiming her willingness to partake of lunch at the earliest possible moment.

* * * * *

She sank down into a chair and let her hands fall limply to her sides.

"I am quite exhausted," she declared. "Will we buy furniture here or in London?"

"London," grunted Alaric, still writing rapidly. "Oh, no, wait a bit. I shall pick about. A piece here," he stopped writing and splashed his pen about, making a large blob on the table-top, "something to appeal to this mood, something to remind me of that."

"I want everything absolutely new," insisted Theodora, "up to the minute and very refined."

"Hum," said Alaric, writing, "Swords and sabers" in the green ink. He paused, "Theo," he said, "will you kindly read this letter?" He drew out the sheet from under the blotter and passed it to her. She read it in silence.

Dear Mr. Proberty,

I am calling this afternoon to inquire your reason for taking the keys, of what is one-third my *property, without my knowledge. This sort of thing is not to be tolerated,*

ALARIC DINGLEBY.

Theodora mused over it for a while and at length said, in a propitiatory tone, "Do you think it very wise, Allie?"

He rose at that and bestrode the hearth-rug. "And why not?"

"Well, we want some money, don't we? Quite a lot of money, and if we are going away it really doesn't matter very much what keys we have of this house. Nothing that is ours can be taken away . . ."

"It was Gussie's doing," said Alaric, getting angry again.

"Of course," said Theodora, remembering her sister-in-law's remark about her brother's "weak head" with doubled clarity.

"Well, why play into her hands?"

"Wouldn't you be doing that by writing as if you were annoyed? Why not let her think you never asked for the keys? It's more dignified." Theodora then relapsed and said more colloquially, "Much more of a wipe in the eye for her!"

"I will think it over," said Alaric grudgingly, "if she were here . . ."

Theodora sighed, "Well, she isn't; if you don't mind I shall go upstairs to my room now for a while. I will see you at lunch."

She left the room and Alaric watched her go. Then for a while he remained upon the hearth-rug in an attitude. At last he went across to the table where he had been writing and tore up his note. He burned it and went on writing The List.

* * * * *

Mr. Proberty had only just returned from the newly formed Professional Men's Club where he now took his luncheon, read *The Times,* and occasionally played a little pool. He had hardly changed from his dark brown jacket to the loose old alpaca garment inside which he wriggled and shrugged happily while conducting business behind his desk, when little Sprig, his junior clerk, scratched upon the door and announced, "Mr. Alaric Dingleby, sir."

Alaric strode in, his cape flying, nodded somewhat distantly to his lawyer (his short memory had obliterated all echoes of the scene relative to his wedding), and, placing his hat upon a wicker basket marked "Out," draped himself in a chair with long, carved arms, and said blandly, "Well, how much money have you managed to raise for me, Mr. Proberty?"

Mr. Proberty stroked his chin and said defensively, "How much do you require, Mr. Alaric?"

"As much as I can get," Alaric replied. "Pa kept me deuced short—my wife requires clothes, too. Until the rooms we propose to occupy have been redecorated, we decided to go to London."

"I see," said Mr. Proberty. "Then supposing I make it convenient for you to obtain money as you require it from the London branch of your father's bank?"

Alaric decided that this interview was going excellently and these old buffers only needed a little high-handedness. He was fortunately unaware that in fact, by the lawyer's private view, he was not doing any more than acting as had been anticipated. Mr. Proberty knew Alaric would demand money—he proposed to present no obstacles. Lady Dingleby's portion was secure, so was Amelia's, therefore what Alaric chose to do with his was a matter of supreme indifference, since it was all bound to be frittered away in one direction or another.

At this juncture, therefore, Mr. Proberty merely made a note upon a blank sheet of paper which lay before him, and then putting his hand down pulled open a drawer and took out a bundle of notes clasped with an elastic band.

"There is a hundred pounds here—to keep you in temporary funds," he said indifferently. He selected a document and passed it across the desk, "If you will just sign here."

Alaric took the notes, held up the paper rather offensively, and read it. Finally he signed.

"Now," said Mr. Proberty with the air of a man who has given an unpleasant child a toy for which he was screaming, "there are one or two matters we should discuss."

Alaric looked bored.

"Your father left two hundred small houses, dwellings with one room, living-room and kitchen, and two bedrooms, all let at rents varying from three and sixpence a week to four shillings."

"That's shockingly low!" said Alaric.

"It is enough," said Mr. Proberty quietly. "Some of the property is in bad condition."

"What do they expect for that rent?" Alaric sounded astonished.

Mr. Proberty told him. "Dry walls, good flooring, paintwork that is not rotting away . . ."

Alaric leaned forward. "If you are asking me to spend some of *my* money on the properties," his voice was ugly, "the answer is *no!*" and he struck the edge of the desk with his left hand. "Ma and Amelia can do as they like."

Mr. Proberty hesitated. He began to speak, then evidently changed his mind. All he asked was, "Is that your last word?"

Alaric rose, bestowed the wad of notes in his jacket pocket, and took up his hat. "There's too much talk of pandering to the so-called poor," he said angrily, "if they don't like it they can get out—my instructions are, raise the rents to four shillings and four and sixpence, take it or leave it, and that'll teach them whose master and who isn't."

"Very well," said Mr. Proberty. "When do you propose to leave for London?"

Alaric was surprised at such an easy victory. His surprise made him awkward. "In a day or two," he said sullenly.

"Then I take it," said Mr. Proberty, looking up at him, "that is all for to-day?"

Alaric was dismissed. As he left the office, in a bad humour, he experienced the uncomfortable feeling that in some subtle manner the little lawyer had got the better of him.

A few paces from the street he managed to rid himself of this preposterous idea and paused to look in the windows of an antique shop where a pair of large Chinese vases gleamed brightly on a dark oak table. He lingered, staring at them. Then he moved suddenly, pushed open the shop door, and said to the man who came forward, "Those vases—how much are they? Let me have a look at them."

He bought the vases—for fifty pounds. He instructed the account to be sent to Mr. Proberty, and he came out of the shop with the address of a paperhanger in his pocket, furnished by the obliging salesman.

When at length he returned by hired carriage to "Laurelston," the vases were beside him on the seat—two vast tomes containing samples of wallpaper rested at his feet, and he had a sheaf of glossy paint charts tucked beneath his arm.

* * * * *

The evening passed domestically. If such a word may be parodied to serve. Amelia kept to her room. Bilson bore orders below stairs that the present furnishings of the newly selected rooms were to be removed to the attics on the following morning, excepting the pieces of lacquer which were reserved for the new "studio."

Thereafter, when coffee had been served, Theodora and Alaric flapped over the pages of the wallpaper books and selected papers at leisure. Theodora fell victim to a glossy dove-grey paper, ornamented alternately with sprigs of pink rosebuds supported by mauve cherubs and sprays of mauve lilac borne by pink doves. This she declared to be sweetly pretty. Both her bedroom and her boudoir were to be decorated with this choice.

Alaric, torn between two rivals, eventually plumped for a black wallpaper, excessively thick, part dull and part shiny, smothered with golden fish, Japanese figures, Chinese pergolas and small dwarf-like trees with spreading branches. The ceiling, he declared, should be gilded, with a black moon and many stars, and the hangings should be of crimson velvet.

Theodora debated upon this for some time and at length pronounced the scheme, "quaint but impressive." They were very civil to one another and delighted that the chosen papers should be the most expensive in the book. Alaric then said:

"I shall stand the vases on tables made to look like lions' heads—painted gold—and I shall have a crimson day-bed on which I can rest and seek inspiration." The two words "rest" and "inspiration" set his mind off upon a more intimate train in furnishings, and he began to sketch, slightly out of perspective, a privy or lavatory, designed like a throne, with a dark red plush seat to conceal the pan, a high chair-back, also padded and covered in dark red with padded arm rests bordered with knobbly gold fringe. His final touch, after he had drawn in the window behind the throne, and a shelf for cigars and books, was a separate drawing of the interior of the pan where sea maidens in aquamarine robes disported themselves among green waves, with their golden tresses spread out upon the water and their arms gracefully extended.

At this final extravagance, Theodora began to titter, and the beginnings of a promising squabble arose between them.

Theodora's obvious mirth only served to make Alaric more than ever determined that he should have his eccentric lavatory. He brought out his list, appended the words *Lavatory, see London expert,* and scored the words broadly underneath.

The disagreement subsided, dinner was announced, and declaring their intention of leaving on the Saturday morning, they went in to eat another large meal.

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They went off just before noon. Carriage, footman, coachman, band-box, and two small trunks were all brought together in the drive. Theodora bade Bilson good morning, issued to Mrs. Blossom final instructions concerning the paperhangers who were scheduled to commence work on the following Monday, and swept out to join her husband with a flurrying of black feathers in her hat and a rattling of the reticule upon her wrist. Bilson closed the door after their departure, heaved a deep sigh of thankfulness, and prepared to relax. Amelia was left alone.

CHAPTER IX

It was Sunday in Easterbridge. Down in the narrow street known as The Rock, the smoke from small fires billowed out from the small chimneys as men and women, freed for a while from their week-day labours, took what passed with them for ease, and because the cold was bitter, stayed indoors where they could.

At No. 11 the Soames family had just finished their meagre midday meal; a dish of potatoes, some well-soaked and boiled split peas, and one of the four loaves which Bert Soames had brought home with him upon

the previous evening. Now he sat before the fire with his pipe empty upon the mantelpiece above his head and stared at the coals and frowned and worried. Minnie was at the sink, helped by her eldest, young Charlie, who would go out presently and return to the church to blow the organ for the afternoon service for children. The remainder of the children played on the floor of the living-room and squabbled noisily.

Minnie Soames finished wiping the dishes and came through from the tiny kitchen wiping her hands.

"I'm goin' along to Ma," she said, "when I've 'ad a wash."

Bert Soames looked up. "Want me to come?"

"You can set there if you'd rather."

"I think I'd sooner come. I don't like settin' 'ere . . . thinking. . . ."

"Well, then, when I've got me bonnet on. . . ." She half turned. "You know, Bert, I'm ever so sorry, but I can't take Ma nothing to-day. We're that short."

"Ma'll understand," said Bert wearily.

Ma, otherwise the widowed Mrs. Soames, Bert's old mother, lived in the Leicester Almshouses on the other side of the town. She had been a widow for some years and had at one time lived with her son and daughter-in-law. When, however, the annual arrival of infants made the congestion too great even for these poor creatures, Mr. Heatherstead had exerted his influence to gain her admission to one of the new Almshouses, where the old lady lived now, alone, without even the solace of a cat for company. Bert Soames made a practice of visiting her on Sunday afternoons when, as a rule, Minnie managed to take a basket of small gifts: a cake, some scones, a jar of soup, with which to improve the meagre diet of the old lady, whose hands were too crippled with rheumatism to permit her to do much cooking.

Presently Minnie came out wearing her only bonnet, her large brown shawl. She picked apart two of the small children who were stuck together in the heat of sudden battle like a couple of small burrs, delivered a gentle homily to them all, and said to her husband, "Well, then, Bert, shall we be off?"

Her husband picked up his cap, tied a muffler around his throat, and went out behind his wife, coatless, in the bitter wind. Their way lay through the centre of the town. Minnie paused at the bottom of the street to read a playbill. "I've never been to a theatre," she said wistfully. "I should think it would be nice."

Bert grunted. "Ma's never been to a theatre," he said flatly. "I dunno that I 'old with 'em."

"Perhaps you're right, dear."

They passed the antique shop where Alaric had bought his vases, and they lingered here, too, and peered through the frosted window at the bric-à-brac.

Then they went on, leaving the small court behind them where Mr. Heatherstead lived. "Our Mr. Heatherstead," said Minnie fondly.

They dropped down the steep, straight hill, with large houses on one side, set back behind high hedges of laurel and rhododendron and small

houses, crammed closely together upon the opposite side—houses which wore a scared, defeated look as if they had been too long snubbed by their lofty neighbours to have any spirit left whatever. At last they turned to the left. The road was wide—fairly new. There was a high pavement upon either hand which bordered a few bare stretches of untended land and several very large houses set inside very large gardens.

"That old devil Dingleby lived there," said Bert, jerking his thumb at the high walls of "Laurelston."

"Never mind 'm," said Minnie, in what she hoped was a soothing tone. " 'Ee's gone to meet 'is Maker, don't forgit."

"I think it's our Maker wot's forgotten us," said Bert sombrely.

They trudged the length of the new road, turned to the right and came upon a rough track which terminated in a gate, a courtyard beyond the gate, and then the long, flat face of the Almshouses cleft in the centre by a roofed alley. They went through this and Bert glanced at the wall on his left where a glass-framed list of rules hung from a big iron nail. Minnie went on; her husband lingered in the alley with the list of rules.

The Almshouses were built like a hollow square around the inner court, which contained a number of small plots of earth intersected by rough paths. These led towards the communal tap in the centre of the plots, the communal lavatories on the south side of the square, and the communal wash-houses on the north side.

Minnie went up one of the paths and opened the door of her mother's house. Bert leaned against the wall while he read the rules.

Rules of The Leicester Almshouses, Easterbridge

1. These Almshouses are under the government of the Vicar, Churchwardens and Overseers of the Parish of St. Paul, Easterbridge, to whom, through the clerk, any complaint may from time to time be made.
2. The outer door shall be closed at 10 p.m. from 1st April to 31st October, and 9 p.m. from 1st November to 31st March, and opened not earlier than 6 a.m. All visitors to leave before the closing hours. Any inmate requiring to be admitted or let out after the regular time must obtain permission from one of the Trustees which permission must be notified to the doorkeeper. In case of illness the door to be opened as required.
3. One of the inmates shall be entrusted with the key of the outer door and be required to observe Rule 2.
4. Each inmate must keep his or her dwelling clean and have no visitor or stranger to sleep there, or keep on the premises any dog or cat.
5. The pieces of garden ground allotted to the respective dwellings must be kept in a good state of cultivation and the pathway in front of each house must be kept clean.
6. Water taken from the supply given is not to be wasted. All waste or damage done to the closets or taps must be paid for by the

persons committing it. All laundry work to be done in the wash-houses provided for that purpose.

7. All rubbish and ashes to be put into the place appointed for their reception.
8. No bad language, drunkenness or misconduct will be permitted.
9. All inmates, unless prevented by illness (to be certified by written word from a member of the medical profession), are required on Sundays to attend church worship.
10. The rent of 1/- per week must be paid punctually to the Clerk at the place appointed by him.
11. Any inmate who does not faithfully keep these rules is, after warning, liable to be removed and, if ordered to be removed, must give up the occupation and the key of the dwelling.

Rev. Canon .....
Churchwarden .....
Churchwarden .....
Churchwarden .....
.....
..... Overseers
.....

1st January, 1900.

Slowly and laboriously Bert spelled out the words. When he had done, he went off slowly to see his mother, saying to himself softly, "Ma 'ud feel better if she 'ad a cat. It wouldn't do no 'arm."

He almost cannoned with his wife, who came bustling out of the door with a pan. "Getting Ma some water," she said. "It's too cold for 'er out 'ere and she 'asn't 'ad a drop of 'ot all day. It's 'er legs, they're that bad! And after she'd crawled back from church she was fairly done."

Minnie trotted the twenty-five yards that lay between the door of her mother-in-law's house and the communal tap while Bert went inside. There was one room and a small hollow inside the door where the stairs scraped upwards meanly against bare uncovered brickwork which sweated damply and was clammy to the touch. The room was eight feet wide and ten feet long. Since her rheumatism had crippled her so powerfully, Mrs. Soames had been unable to use the similar room above, and so she ate, washed, slept in the downstairs chamber, which boasted of a single window so small that the room was airless in summer, and always very dark. There was a tiny kitchen range built in under the mantelshelf, and here all cooking had to be done. When the weather was warm, the sweat rolled off the old lady's face as she heated food or water, and the room was like an oven.

She sat over the fire now in a broken rocking-chair wearing a miscellany of cast-off clothing on her shrivelled body, her scalp glistening pinkly beneath a sparse webbing of white hairs.

"Hello, son," said.

"Hello, Ma," said Bert. He pulled up the other chair—which was deal—much repaired and Minnie came in, put the pot on the fire and sat down on the bed which took up more than half the room. The remainder was filled with the two chairs, a small table which stood in the middle of the room, a yellow chest of drawers littered with cardboard boxes tied with odd bits of string, and a massive portrait of Queen Victoria.

There was not a cupboard in the house, nor a shelf, other than the narrow mantel.

"How is yer work, Bert?" asked Mrs. Soames, breathing wheezily.

"I'm stood off," he told her, sitting with his hands between his outspread knees.

"That's bad," said the old lady, shaking her head. "Always the same after wars, your pore father allus said. Got anything in mind?"

"Something'ull 'appen," said Minnie irrepressibly. "Now, Ma, you jest drink this and I'll tidy yer up a bit." She held out a steaming cup. "You'll feel better with a drop of something 'ot inside yer."

Minnie removed her bonnet, laid it on the table, unpinned her shawl and stripped down the bed. She spent her Sunday afternoon cleaning the room, sweeping the yard. Presently Bert went out, rendering obedience to the rules by tidying the bit of garden his mother could not tend.

At half-past four, he and Minnie left and walked the mile and a half back to their own home, in time for Minnie to cut up another of the loaves for tea, and set the pot boiling to wash her brood.

They left Mrs. Soames talking to herself. It made a bit of sound about the place. "I 'ad my boy' ere this afternoon," she said to the room, "a good boy, my Bert, like 'is Dad . . . I mind w'en I was carryin' 'im . . ." she rambled on through the remembered saga of her confinement, Bert's childhood, his adolescence, keeping herself company in the absence of a cat.

There were thirty old women and old men in the Almshouses, three of them had callers on that raw Sunday afternoon. A number of them must have been talking to themselves. They would have wanted quite a lot of cats!

CHAPTER X

THEODORA DINGLEBY sat back in the corner of her first-class compartment, as the train shook itself towards London, and indulged for the second time over a short period in a spell of clear thinking which did credit to her good sense if not to her sensibility.

She had not married Alaric in a fit of whimsy. She had not accepted his sudden and rather surprising offer because she desired to ratify her equivocal position. Neither had she wed, at thirty-five, because she was in love.

The theatre had been a hard school. Long ago she had known that her ability was not outstanding. Long ago she had accepted as her fate

the touring leads which she knew were the best for which she might hope. Long ago she had intended, if ever opportunity presented itself, to leave the theatre—and the opportunity, though tardy, had at last come. She had accepted Alaric as a lover, for the simple reason that she had, at thirty-four, known perfectly well that it was politic. As she rested her head against the carriage padding, a faint flicker of ironic amusement quivered across her face. She was remembering the story of the provincial tea-party, given benevolently by an elderly patron of the theatre to an entire Shakespearian company. "Tell me," the old lady had inquired earnestly of an elderly actor, "what in your opinion, sir, is the true situation in respect of Hamlet and Ophelia? Do you think there was really anything between them?" "Madam," replied the old actor swiftly, "there always was between the Ophelias I played with!"

Theodora realized that this indeed was the summary "Juste," and her mind passed onwards to other things. She remembered Alaric's suggestion that she should visit his parents' house as his wife—when the summons arrived for him to return as his father was ailing.

* * * * *

She remembered her quick, cold instinct that from this ledge, this precarious ledge, she could at last, if she were skilful, bridge the remaining chasm and arrive securely upon the other side, which was marriage—and the ultimate escape from the theatre. Coldly weighing the cost, for she knew her lover well enough by that time, she consented. As she had willed things to happen they had happened. The extra bounty of Sir Josiah's death and the bequest, she could not accept with such perfect detachment. That was exhilarating—exciting—unforeseen. That was the colour which she had never painted into the scene of her future life—the diversion she had never dreamed of—the pleasure she had never anticipated—and now, leaning back with her eyes closed, she summed up to the point of such enchanting speculation and forced herself to dwell rationally upon this bauble also.

Herein, she decided, lay peril. Alaric would have loose fingers to a well-filled purse—Alaric would have no balance to steady him—no sanity to apply to his spending. Neither might she have, for her portion would always be dependent upon his whims. She therefore determined that bending herself to his slightest wish she would court him afresh, in order that she might benefit, and thus breech herself with trophies of sufficient worth to stand her in good stead should the financial structure upon which they had been raised so suddenly capsize beneath them. Money, she suspected, she would never get—at least not in large quantities. But jewels she might hope to have—and these might be as good as money—if carefully selected . . . likewise furs. Her mind loosed its controls and began to run riot among the allures of sable and chinchilla, while even in this ecstasy she remained constant enough to herself to reject chinchilla with the inward comment—not hard wearing . . . leaving the sable a firm favourite.

Alaric drowsed opposite her, a carriage rug spread over his knees, a half-smoked cigar between his fingers. Suddenly he opened his eyes and found his wife staring at him.

"What are you thinking of, Theo?" he asked surprisingly.

"Me?" Theodora was so startled that he was concerned for an instant with anyone's thoughts other than his own that she showed her surprise, and then rehid it rapidly. "Only how good you were to me, Allie. I was being feminine, I fear. I was dreaming a little about new clothes."

"My wife," said Alaric, "shall be the best-dressed woman in London —I'll see to that."

"And my husband the best-dressed man. Where will you go for your clothes?"

"Pooles in Saville Row, Polson and Scone for my shoes—and we'll take you to Lucille in Bond Street."

Alaric was being unbelievably condescending, "And perhaps to Reville," he added.

Theodora clasped her gloved hands in ecstasy. . . . "I can hardly wait," she said.

Then Alaric disclosed his motives. "Teach that scraggy lot of hens at home," he said evilly; "show 'em what a woman can look like! Show 'em I know how to dress a woman! Show that stuck-up ramrod Gussie. I'll come with you to Lucille," he continued, "run by—who is it?—lady something or other, Lady—Lady . . . regular hoity-toity piece of baggage and a good-looker and I should know. . . ."

"Have you been there before?"

Alaric looked at his wife, realized his mistake, said hastily . . . "Oh, yes, with a feller I knew and his leading lady" . . . and simulated sleep afresh to evade any further probing. Theodora ignored the disclosure and fell to dreaming once more until the train steamed into Paddington Station.

To the porter, as they dismounted, Alaric was excessively haughty; to his wife he remarked, "Have to get a carriage—first thing—must have a carriage—go to Wendovers this very day . . . that's what we'll do, go to Wendovers"; they then entered a hansom cab, were folded in carefully; Alaric said, "The Langham"; the cabby shouted, "The Langham!" cracked his whip, swore at a drayman, nearly ran down a small boy with a broom, and went out of the yard and up the ramp at a spanking pace towards the Langham Hotel.

* * * * *

It was necessary for the Dinglebys to bespeak cabs, no matter how short the distance they wished to travel, because, as the names of the places they proposed to patronize were still only names to them and as they were far from certain as to the exact location of each and every one of them, they would have been forced to discard their haughty languor and confess their joint ignorance if they were not in nearly every case

deposited before the very doors. Alaric, for instance, knew Pooles because the name had been used in the lines of a young duke, played by him in a drama entitled *My Eyes Are Also Wet.*

Likewise, Theodora knew Revilles by name and shop-window, but had never been over the doorway. And Lucille was a name heard from the lips of Miss Connie Ediss when that lady was conversing with a friend in the wings within earshot.

Therefore, when they had lunched—in their suite—which each privately found rather boring, but thought looked distinguished, they ordered a cab, and came out of their rooms preparatory to descending the staircase.

All was glory and glitter about them. The day was dark and foggy, and the vestibule below them, the stairway they approached, the corridor behind them was ablaze with light from many glittering gas chandeliers. Mile upon mile of unblemished Turkey carpet in all the glory of its reds and greens spread before them. White-aproned, black-skirted chambermaids passed them servilely in the passages—the wings of their starched caps and the folds of their starched garments crackling and whispering as they went by. Great pieces of mahogany shone and glimmered, great vases of greens and yellows and terra-cottas mixed together in a heterogeneous pattern upon the highly polished glaze of their surface, were dotted about supporting vast luxurious palms. Palms flanked the stair-head, bloomed luxuriantly on either side of the last step, adorned the rim of the mahogany reception, where a clerk, gilt-braided and splendid, made entries in a gigantic book and a number of young females assisted him in the matter of handing keys, sorting letters, taking messages. Amid all the shifting pattern of human occupation, tiny pages in cloth and gold braid darted in among sweeping trains and stiff-necked gentlemen, bearing trays, crying names, covering tracts of carpeting, scaling leagues of stairway.

Theodora, her fingers resting upon her husband's arm, paused at the stair-head, shook out her none too lengthy train, observed unerringly the greater length of the many trains which brushed the floor below, and came down towards them with her head very high and her carriage very erect—causing more than one pair of male eyes to glance approvingly in her direction.

The authority at reception said a sharp word to his females and let himself out of his pen. One hand outstretched, he conducted these particular guests (they had taken the bridal suite) to the waiting cab, waved aside the commissionaire, installed them personally, received the word "Wendovers" from Alaric, bestowed it upon the cabman, received also a half-sovereign from Alaric, and bent himself nearly double with simulated respect as the cab bowled off with its load.

"My trains are too short," said Theodora, who had a slight indigestion after too much goose.

"My collars are too narrow," said Alaric.

"I'm shabby," said Theodora.

"I'm a disgrace," said Alaric. They were irresistibly like the three

bears in the fairy tale. And they were cowed into misery because they could not support their clothes being inadequate. They know not Sartor Rosartus.

"To-morrow we will get some clothes," said Alaric. The cab drew up before the glossy span of plate-glass windows behind which gleamed the equally glossy sheen of several carriages. Thus Wendovers, Long Acre. The House for Value. The most exclusive, the most unexceptionable, the most impeccable coachbuilders in the whole of the British Isles. Theodora forgot about her clothing and went rustling in.

"A carriage," she said to the attendant, who wore a plain lounge suit and looked rather pleasant, "my husband and I require a carriage."

"A kerridge," repeated the pleasant-looking man with just the merest ring of Bow Bells to his speech. "Certainly, madam—will you step this way, sir? Will you favour me, madam?" And as he spoke he led them farther into the shop, whisked forward two chairs, and had them seated before they knew anything about it.

"Now what nature of a kerridge might you be requiring?" he asked. "Would it be a landaulette, or a phaeton, or a dog-cart, or a brougham?"

"A brougham," said Alaric, "a handsome brougham—the best you have." Saying which he crossed his legs and put up his monocle.

They were shown a brougham. They were shown a second—they were shown a third. They rose once more from their chairs and inspected the broughams at leisure, while the salesman dilated upon their respective worth—until, by common accord, both husband and wife fell under the spell of a particular brougham, number three, which had been designed expressly for a sprig of the nobility, who had changed his mind. The carriage was in truth a paragon among vehicles. The glossy coachwork, dark blue and gleaming, the silver fittings within, and the silver axleboxes without, the elegant dark blue Melton cloth of the upholstery—all, all were exactly as they required.

On this score there was little to be done, the salesman named the price—a mere matter of four hundred guineas—Alaric drew out his chequebook, the transaction was completed.

"Horses," said the salesman, "you have the necessary pair, sir?"

"Not a suitable pair," said Alaric easily. "Might drop around to Tatts, I think."

"Oh, undoubtedly, sir, undoubtedly. Now, let me see, sir, perhaps I might facilitate the matter for you, if you will allow me one moment." He scraped himself off in the direction of an inner office and came back with information. "To-morrow, sir—excellent horses—Tattersalls undoubtedly the place—could provide you with a representative. What were you fancying, bays or greys?"

Swiftly the thoughts went through Theodora's mind—bays and sable—greys and the silver fittings, we *have* the silver fittings, we have not yet got the sables. Aloud she said with an almost imperceptible pause, "Oh, greys surely, Alaric?"

"Precisely, my choice," said Alaric, "a pair of perfectly matched greys. Perhaps your agent might accompany me in the morning? My wife has a

trifle of shopping to do and would no doubt excuse me." He then said in semi-jocular tones to Theodora, "Possibly, my love, the time might not drag for you during my absence if I first left you, say, at Revilles?"

To this Theodora agreed with outward composure while the affable salesman began another of his staccato sentences.

"As to a matter of coachman? . . . perhaps I intrude . . . excellent agency . . . highly respectable . . . employed by all the best titled families . . . fine tigers[1] . . . best appearance in London."

Alaric, wise enough for once to submit to governing without lengthy dissertations which would disclose his inadequacies, accepted the suggestion that the obliging salesman engage for him a coachman and footman, and send them for their liveries. Here fresh discussion arose and it was finally decided that the liveries should match the upholstery, dark blue, silver buttons, cockaded hats, and fitch capes to lend all the final touch of magnificence. Alaric returned to the street the lighter of some few hundreds of pounds . . . and the couple drove back to their hotel.

Because they were not excited about their present wardrobe they again dined *en suite* and went afterwards to the Oxford Music Hall across the river, where they witnessed performances by Little Tich and Vesta Tilley, and came home to a light supper of oysters and champagne. Upon the morrow the business of their trip would commence in earnest.

* * * * *

It was very little past ten o'clock on the following morning when Mr. and Mrs. Dingleby were espied by the clerk at reception descending the staircase in their outdoor clothing.

Let it be said that it was Alaric and not Theoedora who felt the need to precipitate himself at the earliest possible moment into this orgy of spending. Ever childish, he awoke early and fidgeted and fussed himself through breakfast and his dressing, all agog to be gone, and loud-mouthed and irrelevant upon the matter of his purchases. From the recesses of his dishevelled mind floated up such unrelated fragments as scarlet curtains, fur-collared coats, Chinese figures, ivory-backed hair-brushes, cloth-topped kid boots, cigar cabinets, gold-topped canes, and an artist's smock. He leap-frogged inconsequently from house furnishings to personal attire, bloodhounds to oil paints, easels to champagne, toilet soap to coachmen, while his wife laboured patiently to extract a fiat of *carte blanche* for herself in respect of her visit to Revilles. This she achieved finally by pausing in the vestibule to fasten the last button on her glove as a good-looking girl went by with her elderly escort. Then she said clearly and audibly, "Alaric, how much may I spend at Revilles?" and Alaric, who was ogling the lady with some success, said, equally loudly, "Buy what you want, my dear, buy what you want . . ." and the gesture he made was wide, handsome and excessively vulgar.

The orgy was on. They bowled off towards Oxford Street, Alaric

1 Footmen.

deposited Theodora at her Mecca, and the cabby then took his horse off towards Long Acre as Theodora disappeared inside the wondrous doors.

It was early . . . for a distinguished *salon.* A grey-gowned creature of elegant looks was arranging a single fur stole in the window, beside a wonderful hat. Several other grey-gowned creatures were grouped at the far end of the *salon* chatting softly, and one was upon her knees surrounded by a sea of snowy tissue-paper, unpacking a giant cardboard box.

There was a faint rustle as Theodora was seen. The long, grey skirts were separated; through them swam a black-gowned figure, the quintessence of swelling curves and majestic gait, the Chief *Vendeuse* herself, the High Priestess of the domain. "Madame," said this vision, inclining herself like a performing seal, "Madame requires?"

"Gowns," said Theodora languidly, inwardly completely awed, "gowns, possibly some furs, a hat or two . . ."

A frail, spindle-legged gilt chair was twitched forward on an instant. Murmurs of "Cerisette—Violette—Rosalie," slid from the lips of the High Priestess, and the grey nymphs began undulating across the *salon* carpet which was immeasurably thick and soft.

"I am desperately bored with all my gowns," Theodora said, trying not to be aware of the cataloguing look of perfect assessment which the High Priestess directed past her hat, over her gown, her wrap, her shoes, even her gloves and reticule.

"I understand perfectly, Madame," said the High Priestess soothingly. "So fortunate—at this hour—with a new box from Paris but at this moment being unpacked. Madame will permit that first of all we show her one or two of our *most* exclusive models." Madame nodded and stripped off her gloves. She had the same purposeful air as little Violet getting down to her chores in the "washus." Each job had to be done—in the interests of self-preservation.

As Theodora settled herself in the frail chair, the soft silence of the room was shaken by the faintest of rustling sounds. Whisper, crackle, frou-frou, rustle, rustle, whisper . . . the sound grew, as down the room swayed the first of the young creatures displaying one of the creations from Paris. Dresses for the morning, tasteful affairs of cloth and fur—buttoned, braided, frogged, pleated—wide hats adorned with more fur, loops of velvet, bows of *ciré,* bows of velvet, loops of satin—there were the selections from which Theodora made her first purchases. Mourning was ignored. It had no place in her scheme. She selected two costumes for the morning, one of fawn cloth falling away over the underskirt in tunic lines, both bordered profusely in cream and claret braiding, the tunic collar and lapels richly inset with sable. With this she chose a sable muff, and added a wide toque of claret velvet, centred with a claret rose and ornamented with ostrich tips in cream and fawn. For the second ensemble she chose an affair in bottle-green cloth which clung to her figure with innumerable tucks and a line of matching buttons swimming away from her throat to the hem, where more rows of wide tucks emphasized the sweep to the skirt. Here she added a wide-brimmed velvet hat of black with an aigrette, and a jacket and muff of glossy black seal.

With these garments went innumerable rustling petticoats, lace-flounced in profusion.

Then the procession changed its tenor and gowns for more festive wear appeared. First she chose looped and festooned net and velvet ribbons over an underdress of pink watered silk, then a suit in lavender ottoman, frogged and trimmed with falls of fine lace—a matching parasol and one in black with white lace flounces falling from the stem and a handle of blue enamel ornamented with tiny tassels. All these Theodora added to her hoard and demanded to see *négligées.*

Peach pleating in softest *mousseline de soie* raying out from a bodice of ecru lace, lemon satin, trimmed with ostrich-feather trimming and caught with innumerable satin bows, and an affair of black lace and pale blue velvet . . . the tally was soaring. And as she made her choice the High Priestess grew more and more confidential, more intimate, more caressing—and the grey-gowned ladies whirled faster and faster, bearing the burden of Theodora's choice aloft like burnt offerings, which they carried to the tissue-lined bandboxes. More hats—then a garment described by the High Priestess as a *robe de courses,* an affair of diagonal stripes in black and white with a gilet and high uprising collar of yellow, trimmed with fine black braid—a hooded cloak of sequin and seed-pearl embroideries, an eau de nil *mousseline de soie,* to be worn over a violet evening dress scooped away in the front to reveal a cyclamen petticoat, dotted about on the bosoms with giant bunches of parma violets, falling away to a deep *décolletage* of soft flounces. For this ensemble, a head-dress of tulle, violets, several glimmers of paste and single purple plume.

One evening gown was useless, so Theodora again added to her purchases. She chose a ball dress of white watered silk, a diamond-held pink osprey for the hair to match the great clusters of roses and leaves which held the watered silk in tortured convolutions of fold and drape and pleat . . . and over all, the final magnificence, an emerald-green, full-length cape in finest velvet, entirely lined with ermine, caped with velvet, which short cape was in turn bordered with white ostrich-feather trimming.

"And now," said Theodora, whose face was flushed, whose eyes were over-bright, "some furs. I want sable."

The magic word ran like a flame among the *vendeuses.* "Sable . . . sable for Madame . . . sable . . . sable. . ."

The soft, supple thing was spread over the slender, elegantly sloping shoulders of the model.

"Come nearer," said Theodora. She reached out and let her fingers sink into the dark lustre. "Let me try it on."

The cape was arranged tenderly about her shoulders. She swept up the *salon*—turned. She was playing Lady Caribelle Valerian in *Two Hearts That Beat As One.*

"How do I look?" she cried, still in her long-forgotten part.

"Merveilleuse, Madame, ravissante—si chic—si jolie. Madame est charmante."

Realizing the intonations and the outspread hands as indicative of praise, Theodora acknowledged the approval and said simply, "I will have

it," and waited rather spent and breathless while she thought if she dare add more to her morning's purchases. Finally, she decided—no. So she replied to the High Priestess's whispered, "And is there any other little thing?" by saying firmly, "Nothing else—this morning." Whereupon she was invited to resume her seat while a little matter of business was attended to. While this was being done, another grey sylph came out carrying such enchanting reticules that she purchased half a dozen before she knew she had purchased one.

It was at this moment that the doors of the *salon* opened and Alaric appeared. He struck an attitude, raised his monocle, advanced in the character of Malvolio, which was obviously unintentional, and Theodora exclaimed, "Alaric!" realizing at once that this was a providential act of timing.

"I have been so naughty," she said, raising her eyes to her husband and gesturing to the High Priestess to support her.

A chair was arranged behind Alaric and he took it—negligently and nearly mistimed. The High Priestess hovered——

"Such lovely things Madame has bought—*ravissante!*" The High Priestess was also a good-looking woman. She, too, made some play with her eyes. "*Monsieur* will be *enchanté*—he would like perhaps to see?" With a gesture of brilliance, she picked up the sable cape which had been laid aside, and arranged it about her own fine shoulders. The parade was re-enacted for Alaric—a grey nymph brought him a footstool, and gave it him with a wriggle of her shoulders which caused her breasts to look delicious. Alaric nodded, writhed, ogled, leered, while Theodora sat complacent. When she realized how well the wind was set for her she murmured, as a maroon costume with skunk stole went past slowly, "I didn't dare buy that, too, dearest." Whereupon Alaric said loudly, "What nonsense, my wife shall have what she wishes!" and he crooked his fingers at the High Priestess and added the maroon and skunk to the order. Finally, he paid for everything. Entirely breathless—supremely indifferent to Alaric's convolutions—Theodora at last returned to the waiting hansom, where she leaned back at ease and listened to her husband's monologue as they bowled towards the St. James—more familiarly known as "Jimmie's"—to partake of a little liquid refreshment—and their luncheon.

* * * * *

The first bewildering, brassy freshness of her surroundings was passing. By the time they reached "Jimmie's," inwardly fortified as she was by the knowledge of those boxes which would be in her suite when she returned to the Langham, Theodora's poise was emerging from the muddle of her theatrical recollections. Already she was regarding this entrance as a real live entrance upon a real Turkey carpet, through real swing-doors and into real garish glitter, instead of fortifying herself by impinging fantasy upon reality and envisaging canvas, paint, and pasteboard. It was therefore quite easy for her to answer with composure when Alaric said, as they went towards the restaurant:

"Very possibly run into an acquaintance here, Theo . . . pity you're not done up in your new finery."

She was engrossed in a sensuous appreciation of the rattle and hum of activity before them, she was absorbed by the orchestration and cutlery, plates and dishes—she answered carelessly, "If it worries you, dear, we can arrange to meet them again"—then heard her own voice and waited for an outburst.

Providentially, Alaric's impenetrable hide accepted her remark literally, and he agreed, as they entered the restaurant, "Of course we can—as long as *you* don't mind," and looked eagerly about him as they wound between the tables, searching for some theatrical acquaintance on whom he could empty himself of the news of his good fortunes.

There was no one. They drank their sherry, ate half a lobster, a cut off a massive topside, and finished their light meal with a *coupe Jacques,* after which Theodore sipped at a *parfait d'amour,* while Alaric drank two brandies and became very red in the face.

Throughout the meal he divided his time between recounting *his* morning activities and scanning the restaurant for familiar faces (male or female) and unfamiliar with wandering eyes (female).

As the crop of the latter was more than fair, his good humour mounted with the blood to his face.

He had done excellent in the matter of greys at Tattersalls. He had covenanted with the agent to attend to all matters appertaining to the carriage, and in three days, brougham, greys (at £150 apiece), coachman, and footman would be at the doors of the Langham at ten-thirty a.m. From here he had gone to Pooles. Here also in three days, the light grey, trousers, the new frock-coat and dark, double-breasted waistcoat would arrive at the Langham. Thereafter a blue lounge suit would follow and a grey and a fawn, likewise a tweed coat and a cloth coat in finest black, lined with musquash and collared in astrakhan, also a dashing tweed ulster, a cloak for evening wear, a new sailcoat, some new dress trousers, a velvet smoking jacket in a soft shade of blue with claret silk lapels.

He told his dutifully attentive wife a tale of Burlington Arcade—of Ascot collars and Ascot ties in black satin, of wash-leather gloves in yellow, of kid gloves in grey and lavender, of a top hat with a curly brim, of caps and bowlers, opera hats and scarves. He spoke of shirts and night-shirts, of dressing-gowns, and broke off suddenly to say, "Which reminds me" (though how it could have done is seemingly obscure since he was speaking of dressing-gowns), "we must go to a jeweller's this afternoon. I need a pearl tie-pin."

He was by this time engaged in battle with his second brandy. Theodora laid her fingers over his hand and said gently, "Something really nice, dear."

"Yes," he agreed, "and some cuff-links and I need a new watch chain . . . might get you some gee-gaws."

They arose from the table in excellent humour. Alaric paid, took up his umbrella, steadied himself a little against the table, waved away

the change, and followed his wife through the now emptying lane of tables towards the doors.

"Well, Dingleby," exclaimed a voice. Theodora looked up.

Tall, thin, and effete, Alaric's counterpart, cigar in hand, undulated towards them, giving an eye to Theodora and a limp, fishy hand to Alaric.

"Pellingham," exclaimed Alaric. "Theo, don't go—very old friend of mine!"

They made a muddled group in the entrance. Two waiters and the *maître d'hôtel* weaved a passage around them, a haughty female said, "Excuse me," in tones of deepest affront.

Ignoring these things, Alaric made introductions, using his cigar as an attenuated wand, "Anthony Pellingham—my wife."

The attenuated gentleman bowed low, commented a little fulsomely upon the pleasure afforded by the meeting, held Theodora's hand overlong, and finally remarked, "We seem to be in the way, Dingleby," whereupon Alaric suggested hazily, "Come along to our suite."

Pellingham looked suitably astonished. However, he refused.

"I'm with a party, dear boy—cannot excuse myself—deeply regret —are you staying long?"

"While we shop," said Alaric—and Theodora came in with her suggestion.

"Perhaps we might meet some other time, Mr. Pellingham. . .?"

"Capital thought, Mrs. Dingleby." Pellingham writhed in apparent pleasure and fingered a diamond tie-pin. "After the show perhaps we might have a little supper? I believe I'm bound to another little party, but we might mingle?"

"Certainly we might," said Theodora graciously, well aware she would be in possession of her new gowns by then. "Will you name a place?"

"I believe I ought to go to the Pall Mall Restaurant," said young Mr. Pellingham confidentially. "I think I am committed there—as you know—all the world and his wife—there for supper—our world," he added, thus embracing the theatre, the arts, and not a little of the more flighty aristocracy.

Alaric looked distinctly fuddled. "Excellent idea," he proclaimed, after bending rather low over some invisible object, "capital. Say, eleven-thirty . . . give you time to get your make-up off in comfort. Where are you playin', by the way?"

"Daly's, dear boy—doing nothing at all—just a simple understudy and a rag of a part—positively nothing, but it keeps one in touch as it were."

He began a farewell peroration and finally took himself off to a group near the swing doors who were apparently in a hurry.

"Daly's," said Alaric thoughtfully—the brandy seemed to have done its worst and be slightly on the wane. "That'll be . . ."

"Ada Reeve, Gracie Leigh, and Huntley Wright in *San Toy*," said Theodora unerringly. "Shall we go and see the show?"

"Some other time." Alaric retained his fixation for the afternoon's activities. "Mush buy a tie-pin . . . page! . . . here page! . . . get me a

cab . . . tell 'em to drive to Cartiers . . . yes, that's right, Cartiers." His voice rose, "Cartiers," he said a third time, rolling the word around his tongue.

"Cab's here, sir," said the page, coming in like a small lizard.

They drove to Cartiers.

CHAPTER XI

THE suite was in magnificent disorder, the opulent, lush disorder which is resultant upon a mammoth shopping expedition. Theodora, in the peach *négligée,* reclined upon a Recamier couch with a tea-tray on a small table at her side and a sea of tissue paper flowing away towards the walls. Opposite her, Alaric, wearing his new brocaded dressing-gown of richly corded black and gold, endeavoured to read a half-dozen periodicals at once. He opened one, glanced at a page, flung it down upon his small table, pulled at the lowest in the pile, dropped another, laid the first on his knees, dived for the fallen, lost both and recovered them to shuffle them like playing-cards in his hands. The *Sketch,* the *Tatler,* the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic,* the *Strand Magazine,* the *Graphic,* the *Pall Mall*—all these were glanced upon, thrown aside, drawn back again and rediscarded, while from the expression on his face he obviously thought about something quite different. The *Windsor Magazine* lay beneath his chair, and *Black and White* had got caught between the folds of his dressing-gown.

Theodora, deep in the pages of a Parisian fashion magazine, read the advertisements with passionate attention.

Robes, Manteaux, Fourrures. G. Deeuillet et Cie. 18 *Place Vendôme, Paris*—the words looked quite divine!

Guerlain. Parfumerie Française. Grand Luxe. She made a mental note. She must buy Guerlain's perfume.

F. Pinet. Ah, here was a name she knew! *F. Pinet,* 44 *Rue de Paradis, Paris. And* most wonderful of all, *La Maison Paquin,* 3 *Rue de la Paix, Paris.* That was the loveliest of them all!

Both the Dinglebys were having fun! Bandboxes occupied every remaining chair. They stood upon the floor. They overflowed into the bedroom, where the glory of Alaric's expedition to Burlington Arcade was fully revealed.

There were gowns upon the chair-backs, gowns pendant from the outsides of the wardrobes, hats upon the dressing-table and across Theodora's knees where she could stroke and sink her fingers in the sleek perfection . . . the sable cape.

A page scratched upon the door.

"Come in," bade Theodora.

He came in with a sheaf of papers. "The *Echo,* madam, and the *St. James.* I've spoke for the morning papers—the *Morning Post, the Telegraph,* and the *Daily Graphic*—and is there anything else the gentleman requires?"

Alaric got up and dropped three more magazines. "Yes, the *Referee* —on Sundays—*Pick-me-up,* and the *Pink 'Un.*" These last two he declared without a blush—defiantly. Theodora retired behind her magazine and the page wickedly repeated them, and departed after catching the shilling which Alaric tossed to him.

"The *Pick-me-up*!" said Theodora, "and the *Pink 'Un*!"

"I don't care," said Alaric. "And that reminds me"—his mind did another alarming leap—"when we've finished buying shoes to-morrow morning I want to look at some furniture."

Even his wife had no instinct as to the follies that were to be perpetrated from this seemingly innocent commencement. She, therefore, agreed peacefully, remarked that she must visit "Nathans," and rose from her couch to dress.

"Nathans!" exclaimed Alaric startled, "you're not thinking of going back to the boards?"

Theodora laughed, "How could you imagine such a thing. . . ? No, I want some jewelled heels, and Nathans have 'em. That's all. Fun, too, it will be to put those shop women in their place. Many's the time I've stood waiting there to be served while Mister Karl danced around some star—and the rest hovered in the background while I waited! There'll be no waiting to-morrow!" With which pronouncement she trailed her pleated *négligée* into the bedroom and began disrobing.

She wore the black net over the shell-pink foundation, and so subtly was the gown arranged that it was difficult to remark where the low-cut corsage commenced and where the bare powdered flesh ended. She fastened the shell-pink aigrette in her high-dressed hair, with a diamond pin from Cartiers. She clasped a diamond necklace around her throat, slid three rings over her knuckles, and applied hare's-foot skilfully to her cheeks. Then she paraded herself for Alaric, who inspected her with exactly the same expression as he had directed upon the horses in the morning, told her she was a "fine figure of a woman," and at her bidding arranged the ermine-lined emerald cape across her shoulders. She thereupon lit herself a Turkish cigarette from a box labelled Muratti, and inhaled it languorously. Alaric was still fussing. He dropped his studs, lost his socks, kicked one pump under the bed and performed remarkable convolutions in retrieving it. He knocked his cigar on to the carpet and stood on it with a shoeless foot, swore at his wife who was five yards away at least, and managed to leave the room in a state of male dishevelment which was bordering upon the sordid for all its rich trappings. At length he pronounced himself ready, demanded of Theodora why she must keep him waiting, and stood impatiently while she stubbed out her cigarette, caught up her gold-mesh bag and plumed fan, and swept ahead of him to the door.

They went to Romanos to dinner and had the pleasure of seeing Mr. George Edwardes dining there in company with several excessively interesting people.

Theodora permitted her husband to arrange her cloak on the back of her chair (after she had reminded him of this duty) and then began

inspecting the diners with the perfect good will of a woman who knows her clothes are as expensive as any in the room.

Alaric remarked, suddenly, "How delightful it is to look at these theatricals from the right side of the fence," and then said sharply to the waiter, "Bring me some more soup." He was addicted to soup. He was also a careless eater, and there was quite a lot of it on the tablecloth already.

More soup arrived, and he remembered to tell his wife that he had obtained stalls for His Majesty's Theatre to see Mr. Tree in *Twelfth Night.*

"Now let me see," debated Theodora, "when was it produced—fifth of February?"

Alaric nodded, and pushed his soup-plate from him. "Yes, the fifth—very good press. Wonder who's playing Orsino."

Obediently Theodora picked up her cue. "They couldn't be better than you, dearest," she said, with a fine appearance of admiration.

Encouraged, Alaric began, "If music be the food of love, play on," which considerably disconcerted the waiter, who was engaged in placing a grilled salmon cutlet before him.

Alaric ceased quoting and devoted himself to the salmon. Between mouthfuls, he told his wife an entirely apochryphal story about himself and Tree, which he believed but she did not. His good humour increased. A champagne cork popped at his elbow, the bubbles arose in their glasses. Alaric proposed a toast, "To the day when we have 'Laurelston' to ourselves;" he said, looking unbelievably sly.

"To ourselves?" Theodora drank and looked genuinely surprised. "But how, Allie?"

"Ah—I don't quite know yet myself, but it can be done. Oh, yes, I'm sure of that—it can be done."

"But the Will?"

"Even that is not impossible," he said meaningly.

She thought for a moment and the salmon was replaced with chicken. "You mean—that if we were the sole survivors?"

"In a sense," he was hedging. "Amelia might marry."

At this they both laughed with great amusement.

"She might marry," agreed Theodora, bubbling with mirth. . . . "Oh, Allie, poor Amelia . . .!"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" The idea was irresistible. The champagne increased the easiness of their mirth. Alaric wiped his eyes. "I insist," he said again, "she might marry. Money is a great temptation. Why, what are you looking so glum about suddenly?"

"Oh, nothing," she said, "nothing at all. Now, let's drink to Amelia's marriage."

Alaric examined his gold half-hunter and said, shovelling in chicken at a great rate, "Better hurry—we don't want to be late." The remainder of the meal passed with little conversation.

* * * * *

The orchestra was tuning-up. The stalls were well filled. Above them the tiers of faces were craning downwards. Alaric bought two programmes, followed his wife to the centre of Row C, saying, "Best seats in the house, mind you train, Theo," and refraining from any apologies to the persons on whose toes he trod. Alaric never apologized for anything. He screwed in his monocle and examined the programme.

Orsino	Robert Taber
Sebastian	Mr. Quartermaine
Antonio	Fisher White
Sea Captain	Charles Smythe
Valentine	S. A. Cookson
Cirio	Cavendish Morton
Sir Toby Belch	Julian L'Estrange
Sir Andrew Aguecheek	Lionel Brough
Malvolio	Norman Forbes
A Priest	Mr. Tree
First Officer	Edward Fielding
Second Officer	Francis Chamier
Fabian	F. Percival Stevens
Feste.....	Courtice Pounds
Countess Olivia	Maud Jeffries
Maria	Zeffie Tilbury
Viola.....	Lily Brayton

He pursed up his lips. "Ha!" he said with obvious disapproval. "Robert Taber . . . pity!" and he let a long silence dwell upon his regrets. He then stroked his chin lingeringly as much as to say, "Mine is the profile—mine the male beauty for such a part . . ." and waited hopefully for some soothing comment from his spouse. Theodora was saved from such a duty. The house lights went down . . . a hush enfolded the auditorium . . . the curtain rose. For a little while their personalities were surrendered to the stage. Alaric, however, managed to fidget fairly consistently . . . still like a small boy.

When in the first interval he noticed that more than one pair of opera glasses were directed upon his wife, he invited her to take a turn with him, and the pair showed their paces to all whom evinced any interest, until the bell rang to summon them it was time to return to their seats.

When the performance was concluded, Alaric gave it as his consideration that Miss Brayton was a very fine woman indeed, Mr. Quartermain a suitable Sebastian, and Mr. Tree as excellent as ever. He abstained from saying anything whatever about Robert Taber's Orsino, as it had been excellent. This knowledge was so unutterably galling that, according to custom, he ignored it altogether. Which presently allowed him to imagine that he had never witnessed it.

As they walked slowly towards the Pall Mall Restaurant, under the glare of the street lamps, and the glow from the carriage lights, Theo-

dora allowed herself to remember for an instant that she had been in the Pall Mall Restaurant before, for one of the famous half-crown suppers, in company with a theatrical manager who had a double venture to propose to her. She knew that the place was famous, that at one time or another everyone of any consequence who danced, wrote, acted, or just enjoyed the West End life of the day would be seen either dining or supping in its cosmopolitan setting. This remembrance was the added spice needed to round off her evening. She compared her well-worn, slightly tawdry clothing of that past visit with the somewhat startling, but still exclusive attire, in which she now picked her way delicately and she decided irrevocably that this was the better portion.

In this mood she went past her husband and upstairs into the restaurant.

"Small—smart—Bohemian," she thought, looking around her at the satiny, striped wallpaper, the soft lights, the glossy tables.

Alaric explained to the Italian head waiter. "Mr. Pellingham's party —I understand he has reserved a table." . . . The waiter, after consulting a list, led them to a table laid for six, discreetly arranged in a position of vantage and comfort. Theodora seated herself where she could view the room easily, and began fanning herself gently with her new plumed fan.

Alaric ordered a magnum of Heidsieck, and allowed the waiter to light him a fresh cigar.

"Well?" he said.

"I've been here before," Theodora told him, "and I like it. I wonder how long your friend will be."

Alaric again consulted his watch, "We're a little early yet," he said. "We must come here again, Theo, I like this place." He sat besides his wife, where he, too, could view the room, as in fact he was already doing most thoroughly. "That's one of the fellers who played in the last show at His Majesty's," he said, pointing with his cigar. "Can't recall his name—what was the play, ah, yes, *Herod*—played quite a big part . . . wonder if he's out of a shop now?"

"There's Marie Lloyd," said Theodora, "and your friend is standing behind. . . . I wonder who the others are."

Anthony Pellingham came forward swiftly and greeted them both with some effusion.

"But you look ravishing, my dear Mrs. Dingleby. Glad to see you, Alaric. Now may I present Mr. and Mrs. de Bourse—Miss Tillyer—Mr. and Mrs. Dingleby." There was much bowing and scraping, a lot of fuss from busy waiters drawing out and pushing in chairs. Anthony Pellingham insisted on "separating husband and wife," and seated himself beside Theodora who had Mr. de Bourse on her left, a dark-whiskered individual in faultless tails, wearing a white rose in his lapel, and smelling strongly of pomade.

Under the cover of general small talk, Theodora examined the company. Mrs. de Bourse, a thin, elegant, black-haired woman, with red roses and golden aigrettes in her hair and a swirling dress of golden lace and tissue, whose corsage was so low that it was quite unnecessary for

young gentlemen to drop their napkins when seated next to her. She wore sapphires at her throat and on her wrists, many rings, and her hands were almost abnormally white.

Next to her sat Alaric, already bending over her, straining at the leash to tell her his life's story on the slightest opportunity. On his left sat Miss Tillyer, described later in the evening by Mr. Pellingham as a "pocket Venus": a blue-eyed, golden-haired creature, with a slight lisp, a mouth that was made especially for pouting, and tiny, dimpled hands. She wore sky-blue, with clouds of tulle about her shoulders and more tulle among the flowers in her hair. She had a quick, tinkling laugh, a habit of clasping her hands together rapturously at everything which pleased her.

Anthony Pellingham took charge of affairs. He glanced at the waiter, and the waiter was at his side. He said, "Caviare," the waiter repeated, "Caviare"—and Pellingham collected eyes.

"Very well, then, caviare. Vodka?"

"Vodka," repeated the waiter.

No, the ladies would not partake of vodka—they would drink champagne. The gentlemen had vodka and turtle soup was ordered to follow the caviare. After which the company decided to eat partridges—with ices to follow for the ladies.

When the vodkas were brought and the champagne glasses charged, Mr. de Bourse said, looking towards Theodora, "The ladies, God bless them," and the three gentlemen drank to the soft music of Miss Tillyer's tinkling laugh. She clasped her hands, put her head to one side, and said, "I declare I simply dote on flattery even if I do not believe a word of it." All the gentlemen said something gallant immediately.

The supper was an undoubted success. Mrs. de Bourse openly congratulated Theodora upon her toilette. Theodora responded suitably. The elder lady said with compelling charm, "You must come and visit me, my dear; we will drink tea one afternoon. I have a small house in Mount Street—really nothing but a toy house, but I hope it is always open for friends on all occasions."

Theodora was enchanted. Mrs. de Bourse invited her to name the day. With admirable care, Theodora named three afternoons later.

"But why so delayed," Mrs. de Bourse rallied her, "you may not be in Town for long. Why not spare me an hour to-morrow? Then I may perhaps have the pleasure of putting on a small supper party for you before you leave?"

After this the two ladies became completely intimate. They discussed clothes, agreed on everything, swayed across the table to one another like fading tulips in a wind, while Alaric, torn between the pleasure of being manly with the pocket Venus, and being the man-about-town with Mr. de Bourse, was nodding first to the left and then across the table like a giant sunflower in an autumn gale.

With the arrival of coffee, Mr. Pellingham asked gaily when the inimitable Bourses were going to hold another of their enchanting parties, and was rewarded with promises for the near future.

"Just as soon as this dear creature has visited my little house for tea and pronounced herself willing to be my guest, I will engage myself to arrange a party for her especial benefit—oh, and, of course, for naughty Mr. Dingleby's as well." Mrs. de Bourse laid her white fingers upon Theodora's arm, and nodded roguishly at Alaric, who was so enthralled at the label "naughty" that he looked like a coy horse.

"And when are you promised to Mrs. de Bourse, Mrs. Dingleby?" pressed Pellingham.

"To-morrow afternoon," said Theodora.

"I trust you will include me among your party guests, Nerissa?" Pellingham stroked his whiskers lovingly.

"I promise you, Tony, you shall be included." Mrs. de Bourse finished her champagne and agreed to drink a *crème de menthe*. Theodora followed suit. The gentlemen drank brandy.

"Why don't we make a night of it?" said Alaric suddenly. His colour was rising like a neap tide, his eye was already brassy. "Lesh go back to our hotel, all of you, as my guests."

Miss Tillyer clapped and tinkled excitedly. "What a lovely idea, you dear, dear man!"

"Capital thought," drawled de Bourse; "after all the night is still young!"

He said in an undertone to Theodora, "To tear my eyes away from your beauty, fair lady, is a thought from which I recoil—let the night go on for ever is my wish."

Theodora was not to be dazzled by this. She remarked coolly enough that with such a beautiful wife Mr. de Bourse flattered her overmuch.

The man looked stricken—exclaimed reproachfully, "Now I have offended you," and looked so miserable that she felt compelled to be pleased.

The conversation had settled into three duets. Mrs. de Bourse and Anthony Pellingham, Miss Tillyer and Alaric, Theodora and Mr. de Bourse, and everyone seemed to find the arrangement excellent. Finally the bill was produced. Alaric waved his arms about fairly violently and possessed himself of it, paid with a flourish, said loudly, "Keep the change," and even Theodora missed the look which flashed between Pellingham and de Bourse.

The ladies were folded tenderly into their wraps with suitable murmurings, cabs were called, the de Bourses explaining that compunction for their coachman had compelled them to send their carriage home. The party went off in good spirits to the Langham.

During their absence the lavish disorder had become more restrained order. True, there were still bandboxes in profusion, but these were now neatly ranged against the walls. The periodicals had been arranged in a smooth ridge down the centre of a table, the boxes of cigars, boxes of chocolates with "Buzzards" written upon the lids, and the massive vases of roses and white lilac were dotted about the room in an orderly fashion. The dishevelment had been erased by some unseen hands, and made to

look like luxury, so that Theodora conducted her guests into the sitting-room with a complacent smile.

"You must forgive the disorder," she said, "shopping, you know. I haven't had time to open all my parcels as yet!"

"Lovely, lovely flowers," said Miss Tillyer, burying her golden head in the blooms. She hummed lightly, "I bring my love red roses."

"But those are pink," objected Alaric, "get you some red ones in the morning," and he rang the bell, sliding himself down into a chair and stretching out his legs.

More champagne was brought. The ladies disappeared into the bedroom, and, judging from the laughter they left behind them, the gentlemen were busy exchanging improper stories.

Theodora flung off her ermine and velvet and Mrs. de Bourse caught it up tenderly.

"Such a glorious wrap," she exclaimed. "May I try it on, dear?"

Theodora gave her permission. She touched her face up lightly, humming the tune started by Miss Tillyer. Mrs. de Bourse wrapped herself in the ermine and swayed towards the cheval-glass. "Glorious," she repeated.

"I prefer sable," said Theodora, who had never enjoyed herself more. "I bought this to-day."

The temptation was irresistible. Before the round-mouthed envy of the two women she took down the sable cape and slipped it over her shoulders.

The effect was eminently satisfactory.

"Lucky, lucky girl," crooned Miss Tillyer, who then examined her face in the glass and shrieked, "I look a sight," thereupon producing her hare's-foot and dabbing at her cheeks.

"Positively regal, my dear," said Mrs. de Bourse. "Of course, *you* can carry sable. I declare it looks ridiculous on some."

Who could resist such flattery? Certainly not Theodora. The ladies returned to the sitting-room, calling each other Letitia, Nerissa, and Theodora. They received the bubbling champagne glasses gratefully, the flattery as their natural due, lifted glasses aloft, and toasted each other with nods and wreathing smiles.

Alaric then pledged Mrs. de Bourse. Everyone pledged everyone else. Pellingham began to shout a little and breathe rather hard down Nerissa de Bourse's shapely neck. Mr. de Bourse caressed Theodora's arm while a fresh bottle was broached and as the cork popped whispered, "Ravishing creature," and pinched her shoulder.

Alaric got out of his chair and sat back speedily. His eyes were now completely glazed. Everyone talked at once and the faces were universally flushed.

"Another toast—another toast!" shouted Pellingham, waving his glass about unsteadily.

Theodora was sitting on the corner of a table with her slippered feet swinging. One shoulder of her gown had slipped, disclosing the naked flesh. De Bourse bent down, went on one knee. Before she could divine

his purpose he had laid hold of one of her slippers and slid it off her foot. He held it aloft ignoring the owner's protest. It was, indeed, very mild!

"Better than a champagne glass," he said, waving the slipper. "Beauty and love—that shall be the toast, beauty and love." He took up the newly opened magnum, slopped some of the champagne into the slipper, and drank it at a gulp.

Alaric slid still lower in his chair and fell asleep.

This gaff the company ignored—not, let it be admitted, through any delicacy of feeling, but more simply because they were by now a little too far gone to notice the downfall of one of their company. Mrs. de Bourse was waltzing a *pas seul* in the middle of the carpet; Pellingham had transferred his attentions to Miss Tillyer, who suddenly emitted a small shriek at some more glaring indiscretion, and slapped his hand, while Theodora was realizing dimly that she and Mr. de Bourse were progressing far too rapidly. Disliking the dampness of her newly retrieved slipper, she excused herself suddenly in a loud voice, and went fairly steadily into the bedroom to change. Miss Tillyer followed and the party accepted these various signals as suggestive of departure. They prepared themselves by draining the bottle, promising eternal friendship to one another, getting through the doorway more by luck than good judgment, and chattering till their last echoes came back along the silent corridor. Mrs. de Bourse's high-pitched voice, Miss Tillyer's tinkling laugh like the ghost of a faded bacchanal—laughing at their own rather elementary follies.

CHAPTER XII

THEODORA awoke late, dressed slowly, picked at her breakfast, took two Fevre's cachets, and went off by herself in a cab, having arranged to meet Alaric for luncheon at the Continental. She was bound for "Nathans" in Panton Street, where she proposed to "cause a stir" and buy some jewelled heels.

The cab drew up at last, for which she was grateful, as the movement caused her head to ache still more and the Fevre's cachets did not seem to have "worked" as yet.

She stepped out, went through the wig department, and mounted the familiar staircase towards the main showroom. Here she was very much at her ease. Many a time she had bought her greasepaint downstairs, and hired her costume on the first floor. Many the stick of one and half of carmine that she had taken away in its glossy, shiny paper wrapping, and now she was no longer an actress, a struggling actress, welding her art and her artifices together to wrest a living, but was instead Mrs. Alaric Dingleby and very rich indeed.

She held up the skirts of her fawn cloth morning costume with her kid-gloved fingers, sniffed at the pink roses on her muff, and swept round the arm of the stairs to put foot on the "first floor" at last.

The irregular room was dotted about with tables loaded with theatrical miscellany. A row of steel helmets marched along a far shelf, a beefeater's

costume was arranged upon a stand, two fairy dresses lay in a heap on the floor. The glass cases winked down, veiling ancient treasures—fans—swords—the skirted coat of an eighteenth-century gentleman . . . there were prints in little clusters in the corners. A girl's voice was saying deferentially, "Yes, Mr. Karl—certainly, Mr. Karl. . . ."

"Mr. Karl!" thought Theodora, "that's who'll serve *me!* . . . no petty shop-women. . . !"

One moved towards her—all deference—in shabby dress, poor shoes, wispy hair inadequately pinned, her fingers worn, a little red with chilblains.

"I'll see Mr. Karl," said Theodora rudely, staring a couple of inches above the woman's head.

She began tapping the carpet irritably with one glossy toe.

"Oh, Mr. Karl—yes, madam." The woman's voice was soft. "What name did you say, madam?"

Theodora threw back her head slightly, "Mrs. Alaric Dingleby."

The woman went off across the carpet and waited at the elbow of the man addressed as Mr. Karl—the hub and the centre, the very apex of Nathans—the snowy haired, curly haired, elegant little gentleman with the expressive hands and the charming courtesy who presided over this theatrical Mecca, dressed with unvarying custom in brown velvet jacket, pepper and salt trousers, faultless boots, and flowing tie. Who sniffed elegantly at the flower in his buttonhole, who extricated his clients with sure attention from their every predicament.

Mr. Karl looked up, recognized sable when he saw it, recognized the uncertain temper of the lady, permitted his mouth to look a fraction wry for an instant, and then came forward . . . smiling.

"I want," said Theodora, "jewelled heels . . . the best you have . . ."

She got her jewelled heels. She received the utmost consideration—as did all clients—she paid a great deal for three pairs of jewelled heels, and she was assured of the house's best attentions at all times; but she came away with the extraordinary sensation of having been routed by this exquisitely smooth, white-haired proprietor . . . who somehow made her feel vulgar.

She shrugged away the thought irritably, joined Alaric for luncheon, and prevailed upon him to escort her to Lucille's afterwards, where in addition to a couple of gowns they purchased an ensemble for little Geraldine. "You never know," Theodora remarked wisely, "when it might be a good thing to have Augusta's favour."

With this thought in his mind, Alaric paid for an ankle-length dress in lemon-yellow with a high-tucked bodice trimmed with a blue sash and frilled and pleated sleeves. With this went a large mushroom-shaped hat of the same frilled silk over a stiff foundation, ornamented with blue cornflowers and yellow daisies; and a white ermine jacket and muff.

They left Lucille's together, bought an armful of mimosa and pink tulips for Mrs. de Bourse, which Theodora took with her to the tea-party.

The little house in Mount Street appeared to be an expensive toy. It was all very gilt and spindly. Full of flowers and ornaments, kissing

chairs, cosy nooks, soft lighting, footstools, antimacassars, and potted palms. Tea was served in Mrs. de Bourse's boudoir. Theodora availed herself of this close up, to make several mental notes for her own furnishings, and the two ladies gushed over each other for three parts of an hour.

An arrangement was made for the party to be held four days later. It would start at eleven-thirty p.m. and Theodora was asked idly if she played cards.

"Cards?" she repeated mistily.

"Chemmy," said Mrs. de Bourse, putting up her white arms to her black hair.

"Oh, yes," said Theodora, wondering what it was.

"Splendid!" said her hostess. "We shall play chemmy, then—especially for you. Now tell me, pet, what shall you wear; we mustn't clash, you know. . . ."

Theodora returned to her husband, searching for information from him for the first time in their knowledge of each other.

"What?" she asked, taking down her hair before dinner, "is Shemmy?"

"Eh?" said Alaric, who was peering anxiously in the cheval-glass at a spot on his chin.

"Shemmy. Mrs. de Bourse asked me if I played cards. I said what, and she said Shemmy."

"Oh," light dawned for Alaric, "*chemin de fer*—played in Monte, so I've heard—gambling. . . ."

"We're going to play it at the party."

"Have to find out." Alaric burst his pimple satisfactorily and dabbed at his chin with a grubby handkerchief. His handkerchiefs were never clean.

"Where can you find out?"

"Oh . . . er . . ." Alaric appeared to think, and his look was furtive. "Ask Pellingham, I'm lunching with him to-morrow—going to the Queen's in Leicester Square—he'll put me right. Good chap Pellingham . . . hadn't you better think about dressing if we're going to a show?"

"Where are we going to-night?"

"The Gaiety." Alaric was still dabbing. . . . "See the *Messenger Boy* . . . Teddie Payne and your friend Connie Ediss. . . ."

"I don't know her," said Theodora, tossing her head. "I was only a small-part actress in those days."

Alaric turned away from the mirror and began climbing into his dress trousers. "Done yourself a lot of good since then, haven't you?" he said complacently.

"Yes," said his wife without irony, looking in the mirror at the lean shanks that dipped into the trousers legs, "I certainly have, dear."

* * * * *

By the time the Dingleby's blue and silver carriage was delivered at the Langham, it was established in the hotel that the couple were immensely rich. The page boys, who bore innumerable purchases to their

apartments, were in no doubt of it. The chamber-maids who straightened Theodora's dresses were in no doubt of it, and the waiters and doormen, who received the shower of guineas, half-guineas and shillings were more certain of it than anything else.

The ripples of the Dinglebys' spending began to spread. First, to Derbyshire, where Augusta and her mother unpacked the Lucille bandbox of striped black and lavender, and shook out the costly little coat and dress. Then, by degrees, to "Laurelston," where various of the servants answered the door to many and varied persons with a multitude of assorted packages. First among these were Theodora's and Alaric's luggage. All that they had taken with them. The whole collection was returned, and the household was thrown into a flurry of preparation for their owners return also, which was consequently expected hourly.

The rooms they had chosen were already finished by the interior decorators. These were now scrubbed and scoured and polished. An elaborate luncheon was planned—Mrs. Blossom determining to keep on the right side of the bride until something better in the way of employment offered. But no one arrived, and Miss Amelia pecked at the elaborate luncheon in solitary isolation, and ordered bicarbonate of soda afterwards —to be sent to her room. This ritual was repeated at dinner-time, by which time a new pile of parcels stood in the hall, labelled *"glass with care."* Then the flow began in earnest. Crates containing furniture, crates contained bric-à-brac. Bales of curtains, pillows, lamps swathed in sacking, an enormous easel, a parcel marked "artist's colours," boxes, bundles, crates, packages . . . there was a thrice daily stream to the first floor. With parcels from the post—with packages from Messrs. Carter Paterson. Jokes began to be made in the servants' quarters. Bilson looked indifferent, Mrs. Blossom curious, Miss Amelia more sour than ever, and the establishment forgot that Mr. and Mrs. Alaric had been expected home suddenly. They never came. One week became two—two weeks three. The newly decorated rooms on the first floor were filled to overflowing with the fruits of the Dinglebys' London orgy.

The fourth week arrived—Mr. Bilson prepared to depart, departed, was spoken of in the past tense—and still there was no sign of the Alaric Dinglebys.

One morning, over a month after their departure, Amelia came out of her room like a bleached black parasol and went wispily along the corridor towards the Dinglebys' new rooms. She opened the door of the room selected by Theodora as her bedroom and she closed herself inside. The room smelt of wallpaper, paste and soap, string, sacking, and brown paper. It was spiritless, new-looking, and untenanted. It made the house seem like a stranger, a female stranger who had suddenly given birth out of a respectable, ugly chrysalis to a gaudy, pretentious butterfly with poisonous antennæ.

Amelia stood inside the closed door with her hands clasped. She looked about her at the lush mauve and white and pink wallpaper, at the bare scrubbed boards, at the baled carpeting, and she stepped forward to drag back an edge. Vieux rose . ! Emboldened and curious, she

scratched a bare wedge in the thick paper of an adjoining bundle and glimpsed thick silken hangings, gold and vieux rose. She straightened up and peered around again. Then she saw the heap of gay bandboxes. She went towards them through the up-ended crates—slowly, hesitantly. Her fingers shook a little as she tried to lift a lid.

Beneath lay tissue paper (it rustled alarmingly). She paused again, then in dived those loveless hands and out came a hat. A sweeping black hat with curling ospreys and a great veil. The hands stroked the velvet . . . emptily. The woman caressed the hat, bent over it, her eyes speculative and shadowed. Suddenly she seemed sure of her purpose, intent upon her design. She crossed the room, holding the hat. She opened the door, looked up and down the corridor, hurried out, and vanished along the passage into her own room.

Here she tried on the hat. Here she took down her hair, brushed it anew and piled it high, arranged the hat, wiped off the dew-drop, took off the spectacles, and saw her blurred image kindly.

Downstairs, Mabel was arranging some letters on the table in the hall and a telegraph boy was whistling his way up the drive. As the telegram was addressed to Bilson, Mabel promptly took it downstairs to Mrs. Blossom, who hunted about in her desk for her spectacles and asked about the post.

"No more parcels for a blessing," said Mabel. "I'm sure, Mrs. Blossom, we'll have to empty another room if we have any more. . . ." She was playing for time, hoping to know the contents of the telegram.

Mrs. Blossom found her spectacles, put them on, peered over them like a distressed tortoise, inquired acidly, "Why do you linger, Mabel?" and managed to make the phrase sound like the first line of a popular ditty.

Mabel mumbled, "Not waiting m'm," and turned about reluctantly.

Mrs. Blossom opened the telegram and read it three times without stopping. Then she put it down, took off her glasses, and stared into space for several seconds.

Returning to-morrow afternoon, send carriage. Alaric Dingleby.

"Now for ructions," she remarked to an oleograph of her late father, "now for ructions."

* * * * *

Amelia put back the hat. She laid it back in the bandbox, folded down the swathes of tissue paper, returned the lid, and stepped softly from the room. There was a strange light in her eyes. She was not her father's daughter for nothing, even if she was on the shady side of thirty.

She marched down the stairs looking particularly plain, saw the letters, and raked them over. Miss Amelia Dingleby. There was one for her, in Lady Dingleby's familiar, crabbed handwriting, in which the laborious

transcriptions of childhood still lingered. Amelia took it into the library and opened the frugally crossed sheets. There were several.

My dearest Amelia,

I trust that you are in good health. It is still excessively chilly and I hope that in my absence you are remembering to take good care of yourself. Keep your chest well covered, and if you require some red flannel you will find a piece in the second long drawer on the right-hand side of my wardrobe. Do not hesitate to use it.

Augusta is in excellent health. She is the best of mothers. A most devoted daughter. She has contrived to make my visit as agreeable as possible under the circumstances, as has my darling Geraldine, who is the most astonishing child.

Even so, I feel that it is now my duty to return home and take up the duties which your dear papa's passing have left to my less capable shoulders. I am leaving to-morrow morning, and shall hope to be with you at some convenient hour after noon. Be good enough to instruct Bilson to send the carriage.

Amelia read no more. She laid down the letter and pealed the bell. "How like Mama," she thought irritably. "Another of her impulses—home to-morrow!—to-day that is—without warning—addle-pated that's what Mama is. . . . Oh, Mabel, kindly inform Mrs. Blossom to prepare her ladyship's rooms with all speed. Her ladyship is returning this afternoon, and tell Mrs. Blossom that the carriage must meet every likely train as her ladyship does not mention the time of her arrival."

Mabel put down the glass of madeira and the two wine biscuits, for which she thought the spinster had rung, said "yessum" obediently, and retired post haste to Mrs. Blossom.

"Missus is coming home, too," she said unceremoniously.

"Who?" said Mrs. Blossom direfully.

"'Er ladyship."

"That's better, Mabel."

"Yessum."

"Now calm yourself and tell me properly what Miss Amelia has told you."

"She's 'ad a letter. She don't know what time this afternoon so the kerridge 'ull 'ave to meet every train."

Mrs. Blossom clicked her tongue irritably. "Most inconsiderate—and us shorthanded and all. Fetch me that girl Bess—don't stand there gawping, get along and make up some beds, there's plenty of aired sheets in the linen cupboard along the first landing. And mind you bring back them keys. Now go along."

Upstairs in the library, Amelia was continuing the letter.

I have another particular reason for wishing to return home now. Dear Gussie has very lovingly suggested that you, too, might like a change of air and scenery after all the sad times you have endured recently, and

so, my love, when I return, you shall depart, and dear Gussie will endeavour to make your stay as pleasant as she has done mine, trusting that will find enjoyment in the small intimate circle of close friends who come to the house during this period of mourning.

Again the letter was laid down. Naturally, Amelia's first impulse was to refuse. She wasn't going to be bandied about like a schoolgirl . . . then she paused and took time for reflection. Light thought wooed deeper thought—an idea uprose within her mind, a very sudden and definite idea . . . it went smoothly with the idea she had conceived earlier after trying on Theodora's hat. It went very well with it indeed. She would go. Certainly. Mama should be pleased, Gussie should be pleased, she herself would be pleased. Because she was perfectly sure that the root and branch of all this was a sudden conspiracy between her sister and mother to *marry her off*.

Again she rang the bell. Again Mabel came, breathless. "Send round the carriage," commanded Amelia, "I am going out. Oh, and, Mabel, inform Mrs. Blossom that I shall require my trunk bringing down from the attic as soon as possible. I am going away."

"Yessum," gasped Mabel.

She fled towards the housekeeper's room. "Now Miss Amelia's going away," she announced, "and she wants 'er trunk, too, down from the attick as soon as possible."

Mrs. Blossom put down her glass of cooking port. "It's my belief," she said prophetically, "that this 'ouse'old"—her aspirates went unregarded in the stress of the moment—"that this 'ouse'old 'as gone stark, staring mad. Bilson's well out of it, that 'ee is."

She thereupon laid down Mr. Bilson's stiff, formal note which advised her that his new situation was well bred but *close* and possibly money was a little tight, but that gentility was something after all these *parvenus*. "Get up them stairs, my girl. I shall 'ave to give you an 'and myself." Her bombazine rustled angrily, her whole pose was out of outraged dignity and affronted majesty. She paused in the doorway and, thinking better of her offer, went back to finish her port.

* * * * *

On the morning of the de Bourse's party, Theodora had inquired of her husband as to the mysteries of *chemin de fer*. These Alaric had attempted to elucidate for her in a manner which left her more bewildered at the finish than she had been ignorant at the onset. The Mad Hatter could have done no worse. Alaric, however, appeared perfectly satisfied.

He marched off towards the bathroom, after delivering himself of his dissertation, and left his wife to finish her toilet. This she did speedily, and left waiting, with nothing to do, began to gather up some of the male garments which strewed the room. It was during this operation that she discovered a small paper-backed book titled *Chemin de Fer for*

the Uninitiated. This she popped into her reticule as her husband returned to the room.

"How was Mr. Pellingham?" she inquired wickedly.

"Pellingham—how should I know?" Like all bad liars, Alaric speedily forgot his lies.

"Well, you lunched with him two days ago."

"Oh, of course . . . of course . . . well, that is, I was supposed to lunch with him . . . couldn't make it in the end . . . ran into Miss Tillyer and her . . . er . . . her brother . . . had to put Pellingham off. . . ."

"I see," said Theodora, quite unruffled. "How was dear Letitia?" To herself Theodora commented, without flurry, "So that's started again!" and determined to make Alaric purchase her the diamond bracelet she had seen in Mappin and Webb's. To this end she commenced, "Darling . . ." and Alaric responded suitably in relief that there was to be no scene.

They went to the party and Theodora wore her bracelet. There were above twenty people present and Alaric nearly died of gratification when he was presented to a bulbous-nosed gentleman with enormous whiskers—a Lord—as Alaric deemed him privately. "A real live Lord!" Alaric was not sufficiently *au fond* with social gradations to know that this particular peer—denizen of gaming houses (of which this was one), drunkard and lecher to no inconsiderable degree—was frowned upon most severely by those of genuine *"ton."*

The chandeliers were very bright in Mrs. de Bourse's little house. The champagne sparkled deliciously. The dresses of the very good-looking ladies rustled and glimmered, rosy lips pouted, jewels glimmered (again Alaric and his lady were unaware that the majority were paste), the buffet was loaded with good food . . . he would be the last person in the world to perceive that the golden hangings were slightly soiled, or the delicately patterned carpet slightly worn, or the gilded chairs slightly chipped . . . or, in fact, that there was a slightly frowsy, dissolute, overblown look about the whole establishment. There was a manservant constantly circulating with good liquor (this at least was irreproachable; Mrs. de Bourse was no fool!), and by the time midnight had struck the majority of the company, in the best possible humour, had gathered about the table and the first game of the evening was on.

Mr. de Bourse—"Call me Gerald, I beg, lovely lady"—took it upon himself to advise Mrs. Dingleby, and did so with such skill that the lady won over a hundred pounds without realizing either that such was her host's intention, or that she was being instructed by someone who was perfectly aware that she had never before played in her life! Mr. de Bourse was no fool either!

At four o'clock in the morning, tipsy and bemused, the richer by several hundreds, Alaric lurched down to his frozen coachman, was installed in his carriage, and conducted a murmurous incantation all the way back to the hotel. He was supremely satisfied with everything.

"Wonnerful party," he burbled, flinging out his arms and nearly

knocking his wife's head off, "wonnerful people . . . arish . . . arish . . . arishtockrasy . . . highest class . . . wonnerful game . . . everything wonnerful." It was necessary to assist him up the vast staircase to his bedroom. It was, in fact, necessary to put him to bed.

For the following three days before the next little party was fixed, Alaric and Theodora bought furniture, carpets, and curtains, and despatched them to "Laurelston." They lunched at the Continental and dined at "Kettners" under the rosy glow of the intimate little pink lamps. They trod the rose carpets of this most exclusive small restaurant, paid for their most expensive cooked dinner (close on thirty shillings with wine), and went off, by way of contrast, to the Pavilion Music Hall, where they saw Arthur Roberts and Dan Leno, and finished up with supper at the Pall Mall.

Alaric bought himself a gold toothpick and Theodora another bracelet and watch pendant, received the remainder of his clothes from the tailor, and went off to luncheon alone which, Theodora realized, meant "dear Letitia." This enabled her to spend a few hours alone also, and when she ran into Tony Pellingham she permitted him to take *her* out to luncheon and enjoyed herself very much indeed.

At the second gaming party the Dinglebys lost. Not much, just a few hundreds. Mr. de Bourse assured them that they would have better luck next time. But next time Theodora pleaded a headache and refused to play. Not entirely because of the money. Gaming bored her—besides which she did prefer changing money for purchases when she had to part with it at all. She therefore sat in a convenient bower with Pellingham who made love to her very charmingly. At four in the morning her swain, searching for fresh liquor, came back with the news that "your charmin' husband is just the smallest bit under the weather, dear lady."

On this occasion Pellingham assisted Alaric to his carriage and made a further engagement with Theodora for a luncheon *a deux*.

So matters went on. According to time-honoured tradition Alaric won a little and lost a little. By the same pattern the winnings and the losings gradually mounted until the evening just over four weeks after their arrival in London when Alaric, extremely drunk, rose from the table the lighter by ten thousand pounds, for which de Bourse held his cheque; which cheque he cleared upon the following morning, despite the rocky signature, long before Alaric awoke groaning, declaring the champagne had been drugged.

He arose at length, and after a short scene with his wife, went out in search of Pellingham. He was nowhere to be found. His landlady at his lodging assured Mr. Dingleby that Mr. Pellingham had only been there a short while and had left on the previous evening. Thereupon, in a towering rage, breathing rather heatless fire, Alaric bowled towards Mount Street, where he found shutters up, blinds down, doors secured, and a crone in the basement who said the "parties" had gone that morning, the house only being rented furnished, as it were.

Alaric returned to the Langham slumped in the corner of the carriage like a rag doll. He, being the pigeon, was the one person among the rest

who was not aware that Mr. and Mrs. de Bourse were undoubtedly giving another of their intimate little parties at another small house in the neighbourhood in about a couple of days' time.

By the time he reached his suite, his rage had reached a pitch of blank frustration which was too much for his butterfly mind. He went into the sitting-room, and slammed back the door violently. Theodora came out of the bedroom.

"Well?" she asked.

Like an hysterical woman, Alaric began to scream. He seized a copy of the *Sporting and Dramatic,* still rolled from the delivering page's hands, and he began wielding it like a flail.

"Done," he screamed shrilly, leaping around the room like a madman, smiting every object that he passed, "done! Fiddled, swindled, by a pack of rotten twisting crooks!" His voice rose perilously, cracked, and went on screaming. A vase full of roses toppled to the ground. He tripped on a corner of a rug in his mad-leaping circuit, and he brought his feet together like an enraged child and stamped on the offending rug, up and down, up and down, the rolled magazine in his hand, the other sweeping objects off a nearby table. "Done," he yelled again, and the tears began to roll down his face. "I . . . will . . . have . . . the law . . . on . . . them. . . . I'll hound . . . them . . . out . . . of London . . . they . . . can't . . . do . . . that . . . to me. . . ." Each word was dotted with a leap, each leap with a scream, and gradually he circled the room for the second time. Theodora stood and watched him. She leaned against the door and saw the flaccid repulsion of that uncontrolled face, and she waited.

"You'll make yourself ill if you go on like this," she said calmly, after a pause.

Alaric paused, his shoulders hunched. He looked at his wife. "Trollop!" he screamed, "carrying on with that Pellingham—under my nose—dirty low-down stage trollop—get out of my way . . ." and he plunged past her into the bedroom, slammed the door, and wrenched the key back in the lock.

After a few moments Theodora came away from the wall and began straightening the room. When she had done all she could, she rang the bell, and gave the page who answered her summons instructions to send a telegram and bring her an ABC. She knew well enough that now they would be going home.

CHAPTER XIII

THEODORA knew better than to mention London. It was never spoken of again. Alaric stumbled out of their bedroom at the Langham, looking as if he were drunk. He swayed in the doorway on his heels and toes, said thickly, "Pack—we're going home," and they went home, as she had known they would do.

They went back immediately, in a flurry of packing and bill-paying.

Alaric close-shaved his final tipping and earned glum looks from the hotel staff, and the bandboxes, the jewel-cases, and the new luggage were loaded on to two cabs. The new carriage went down after them, with the coachman and the footman, both of whom Alaric immediately dismissed. Theodora counted over her jewels and her furs and folded them away.

* * * * *

Mabel admitted them to the house.

"Where's Bilson?" snarled Alaric, dropping off the carriage rug into the doorway. "Fetch Bilson instantly."

"I'm sorry, sir," Mabel was demurely impertinent, "Bilson has left, sir. He isn't here any longer."

"Well, don't stand there—see to the luggage! Alaric trailed into the house, raked over the letters on the silver tray in the hall, took a package of bills addressed to himself, and shouted back at Mabel, "What room?"

Mabel told him. They slept on the first night of their return in one of the guest rooms, they had trays of food sent up to them, and hid their sores behind a plea of fatigue. Theodora spoke pleasantly to Mabel, asked Mrs. Blossom if she would be so good as to see her in the morning, and at length went miserably to bed.

It was so impossible for Alaric to sustain any mood constantly for more than a few hours, that by the time he had drunk half a bottle of claret with his evening meal he was somewhat restored to what passed with him for normality. He remembered that his new rooms were awaiting his attention, found the remembrance pleasing, so dilated at some length to his wife upon the schemes he proposed putting into operation forthwith. Theodora, weary beyond speech, and brutally disillusioned, was grateful for this prospect which would keep her husband absorbed for, at the least, several days.

In the morning she took final stock of their situation and prepared to make bricks without straw. Somehow, out of the wreckage, she determined to make some sort of a life for herself.

Alaric went off whistling, after breakfast, to attend to the all-pressing urge for unpacking. Mrs. Blossom appeared, formidable in bombazine, hair-locket, and jinkling keys.

Theodora invited her into the room and asked her to sit down, as, she said, "there are several things I would like to discuss with you, if you can spare me the time?"

This vibrated pleasantly on Mrs. Blossom's ears, as containing the right mixture of deference to her experience, and bias towards supervision, which, to tell the truth, the woman missed sadly since the passing of the domineering, interfering, hectoring Sir Josiah.

She consented to take a seat, and arranged her large behind upon the edge of a chair, her large hands upon her ample stomach. She then waited for Theodora to begin.

"First," said Theodora, "I would like to know what news you have of her ladyship?"

"Her ladyship," said Mrs. Blossom, "returns to-day."

Theodora digested this. "Then," she said, "perhaps before discussing the question of servants with you I had better see her ladyship."

"That would be best," agreed Mrs. Blossom, "though," she added, "if it's a matter of a maid for yourself, madam, I don't doubt I could find a respectable girl for you."

This offer Theodora declined. She had other plans. However, she remembered to thank the housekeeper.

The decencies being upheld, Mrs. Blossom vouchsafed some more information. "We are a little busy to-day, madam, with Miss Amelia going away; I gather you have not yet seen Miss Amelia?"

"No." Theodora was quite calm. "Mr. Alaric and I were fatigued last night."

"Miss Amelia is going to stay with Mrs. Foote, madam, for an indefinite period."

Theodora brightened. "Is she going to-day?"

"Yes, madam."

"Then I must see her. Now there is one more point. Can you spare me someone to assist with my unpacking?"

Mrs. Blossom suggested Rose. "She's only the kitchen-maid, madam, but she's quick, and not over-foolish."

"Then send her up to me, please. Perhaps someone could join her this afternoon to assist in hanging curtains and laying carpets?"

Mrs. Blossom decided that Mabel could be spared for this, with the coachman to do the heavy unrolling.

"Then, I think," said Theodora, "that that will be all for the moment. If you will kindly let me know what time her ladyship is expected I will make sure I am ready to welcome her."

"That I am afraid I cannot say." Mrs. Blossom pursed up her lips. "Her ladyship omitted to mention the time of her arrival, and the carriage will have to meet each train."

"Then I will hold myself in readiness." Theodora seemed determined to let nothing ruffle her this morning. "Thank you, Mrs. Blossom," she added.

Mrs. Blossom got to her feet and took herself off, with a little increase in her good opinion of the bride.

When Rose arrived in her pink print and white apron, Theodora professed herself in readiness to start at once, and they went along the corridor to her future suite, where they encountered Alaric coming out of his new room.

"Theo," he said, apparently highly elated, "you haven't seen my lakker, have you? Come along in here and have a look."

The child was busy among his toys.

* * * * *

Lady Dingleby arrived soon after luncheon. She peered out from among her "weeds" as the carriage came to a standstill and Theodora

opened the door. She had heard the wheels on the gravel, and now looked out to see if the carriage were empty or not. Lady Dingleby's small face was creased with worry. Her cap was askew, her hands caught up in a tangle of flowing *crêpe.*

"Theodora, well . . . what a surprise! Watson, open the door . . . never imagined . . . am surprised . . ." She dropped stray words about her like falling leaves and, struggling to release her black-gloved hands, tugged off her cap completely. Down came a wisp of grey hair. "Oh, dear me!" she exclaimed, cramming the cap back again at a debauched angle. . . . "Thank you, dear . . . only my jewel-case . . . such a journey . . . disgracefully cold . . . so silly for people to call it seasonable . . as if that meant anything . . . I'm no more pleased to be cold in winter than in summer. . . ."

Mabel hovered in the background. But it was Theodora who took charge. She said to Mabel, quite firmly, "Bring her ladyship's things to her room at once, then bring tea, and a little brandy," and as she issued these orders she assisted the flustered little woman to alight, collected the fallen reticule, and then, holding on to her mother-in-law's arm, took her carefully up the steps into the house and straightway up the stairs."

"Where are we going? . . . very cold . . . library fire . . . Theodora," fluttered Lady Dingleby.

"I have arranged a fire in your room, *Mother,*" said Theodora, continuing to propel her charge up the stairs. "Mabel will bring you hot tea —then you can rest after your journey, and Victoria shall change you . . . where *is* Victoria?"

"I left her overnight to settle Amelia . . . we crossed on the way . . . such a pity Amelia did not wait to see me . . . surprised at her telegram . . . so unlike her . . . all in a hurry, too. . . . Gussie was surprised as well."

By the time they had reached the bedroom, Theodora had untangled this information and decided that Amelia's flight had been sudden and unexpected. Theodora concluded that Amelia had wished to be gone as soon after her brother's return as possible. She made no comment upon this, however. She steered her mother-in-law into her bedroom, relieved her of cap and weeds, settled her in a chair before the fire, took off her little buttoned boots and proffered warmed slippers. Then, standing back, said fondly, "Now, isn't that better?"

"Delightful . . . so good of you . . . so kind . . . so kind." Here the ever-ready tears flowed over at the unaccustomed fussing, and the good lady indulged in a pleasant little weep.

Mabel arrived with the tray . . . and a decanter.

Theodora dismissed her.

"What's that?" Lady Dingleby peered through reddened eyes at the tea tray . . . "in that decanter?"

"Brandy, Mother . . . for you. Now I insist. You are quite blue with cold."

"Oh, but I couldn't. I have been a lifelong abstainer . . . never . . . passed my lips."

"Well, it's going to now," said Theodora, quite unruffled. "For medicine." She poured out some brandy into a wineglass and held it to her mother-in-law's lips. "Now come along, please, be good."

She looked so appealing, in her black (all the new dresses had been wisely laid aside), that Lady Dingleby, instead of obeying, took the younger woman's face between her hands and kissed it. "Bless you for a good, kind girl," she said affectionately. "Alaric is a very lucky man."

"Never mind that now," Theodora said smilingly. "You just drink this brandy."

"Oh, I don't think I ought to, dear."

"Now come along."

The old, long-accustomed line of domination won. Lady Dingleby took the glass. Sipped, grimaced, shuddered, sipped again, protested, sipped once more, shivered . . . a little less, drained the glass, and set it down. Then she groped for a handkerchief and Theodora gave her one. Lady Dingleby wiped her lips.

"What a remarkable drink," she said ingenuously. "Unpleasant to taste, but, as you say, most warming. I can feel it . . . like fire." She laid one hand on her stomach to indicate the course of the brandy.

"You should take a little regularly," said Theodora, "it would do you good. I wonder your doctor doesn't order it for you. After all you have suffered." Theodora suddenly decided to become playful. "I shall have to be your doctor."

"And so you shall if you wish to, my dear."

Theodora poured out tea, insisted on Lady Dingleby eating two slices of thin bread and butter. Then she answered a knock at the door and admitted the servants with the luggage.

When they had gone. . . . "How is Alaric, my dear?" inquired his mother.

"Very well, thank you. We had a delightful time. We bought a lot of lovely things, and now we have come home. Alaric is busy unpacking —you know we only got here yesterday. Just in time to welcome you."

She rattled on about her purchases, delicately pruned for this conversation, and then by easy stages, when the older woman was relaxed and the brandy had begun to work, she steered the conversation around to the household and its commitments.

"I suppose you know," she began, "that Bilson has gone?"

"Oh, dear me, no. Mr. Proberty wrote to me but I quite thought the matter would be left until my return. Bilson has been with us for years, quite a number, I don't know what we shall do without him."

"Well, I'm afraid he's gone. He left a few days ago. Mr. Proberty had to accept his notice. He endeavoured to persuade him to change his mind, but his efforts were unsuccessful. And that is what I want to speak to you about. We shall have to engage someone else. I have already had a nice little chat with Mrs. Blossom—a most respectable woman—and she assured me we shall be able to find another man. I want to be a help to

you. I don't want you to feel that you have a stranger and an intruder in your house, but just another daughter on whom you can lean, someone to whom you can turn in trouble and difficulty, someone to take a little of the responsibility off your shoulders."

Theodora paused. Lady Dingleby took over.

"Such an idea—intruder—outsider—wicked girl. You *are* my own dear daughter, in fact," the weak-willed little lady permitted herself a fractional lapse, "your speech is infinitely more daughterly, I fear, than that of Amelia upon occasion."

"Hush," said Theodora.

Lady Dingleby added hastily, "though I must say also that Augusta has been the very soul of duty."

The mention of Augusta's name brought back a dim memory of the various homilies which this determined lady had read her mother upon the question of the Alaric Dinglebys and their designs. But what with the welcome, and the affection, and the attention, and the brandy, these homilies were but faint echoes of the strong speeches of which she had been the recipient. Memory was fading fast.

"Then," said Theodora briskly, "that's all nicely settled. I will arrange about the servants for you and bring my choice to you for final inspection. I will see Mrs. Blossom later. In fact, we'll send for her here and you shall tell her. She may refer to me in all matters and leave you quietly to rest and build up your strength."

For a second the victim wavered. For a second the last echoes of Augusta's words lingered in her ears, then, looking at the affectionate face, the attentive pose, the whole dutiful demeanour of her daughter-in-law, discretion finally departed and . . .

"Just as you wish, my dear. To be sure, I never was a good person at handling servants. Sir Josiah always did these things himself, and I miss him sadly in that way as in many others." This was the signal for another little weep, to which Theodora ministered tenderly. After which she gave her mother-in-law another cup of tea, rang the bell for Mrs. Blossom, and saw to it that the fiat went forth at once.

The dinner *"à trois"* that night was all that could be desired. Lady Dingleby was flutteringly happy, Alaric full of his interior decoration schemes, and Theodora compliant to both of them. Mabel took down excellent reports of the new atmosphere. Theodora's stock rose, and when she scratched upon her mother-in-law's door that night and entered to bid that lady good night, she gave her another half wineglassful of brandy, "to ensure she slept after the journey," and went to her own room well content.

* * * * *

Two months later the news broke. The strange, unbelievable news which took them all by surprise. In the meantime, much had happened. The reins of government had slipped gradually, almost imperceptibly, into Theodora's hands, and the servants took their orders from her without

question. Her rule was easy, within certain limits. The standard of the food in the kitchen was slightly improved, and the only order upon which she demanded implicit and unquestioning obedience was that Mr. Alaric should be humoured no matter what his demands. This course of action set the final seal upon that man's destruction.

It did, however, make life bearable for the two women of the house. For the first two weeks he was surprisingly content. Such little matters as a screaming fit, because he hammered his fingers instead of a nail and went about with his arm in a sling for three days, a further paroxysm of rage when his mother suggested that four hundred guineas for a Chinese lacquer cabinet was "a little expensive, dear" (the cause of her remark was that a candle had been stuck by the dripping wax on to the surface in order that Alaric might see more clearly into the recesses of some of the small drawers), and a fit of the sulks which lasted for one whole day because his wife did not enthuse sufficiently upon the crimson and black of his unpleasant and more than faintly erotic room—these things were taken as trivial, and on the whole the situation pronounced good.

However, at the end of two weeks, Alaric was becoming bored. He had kept unbrokenly to the house. He had slept late, and gone to bed on the crimson divan in his clothes on several occasions; he had set up his easel, rearranged his paints several times, posed in his smock and velvet beret, and stormed up and down the room for an hour in search of inspiration. Now, he declared, inspiration must be sought farther afield. He must go out.

This provoked a discussion. What he wanted was a party. But a party was out of the question—the family was still in mourning, and even Lady Dingleby's frail courage withstood such outrageous suggestions. Six months after Sir Josiah's passing, she said, she would consider renewing her "At home days." Later, perhaps, a few quiet dinner parties, and so a gradual resumption of the limited and agonizingly dull social circle in which she normally revolved. In the meantime nothing, and if Alaric required amusement, he must seek it away from the house . . . well away. Ill-advisedly the widow suggested a little trip to London—added that she was sure dear Theo was tired to death of being chained to an old woman's skirts. She was appalled at the convulsion which tore at Alaric's face. His mouth worked, his eyes became inflamed, and the hand he put up to his shaking mouth was twitching as with the ague. "London," he shrieked. And stormed out of the room.

In tears, Lady Dingleby turned to her daughter-in-law. "What have I said?" she wailed, "I only suggested . . . you said you had a delightful time . . . I thought it would please . . . I don't want you to go away and leave me alone in this great house . . . I'm nothing but a poor, lonely old woman. . . ."

Theodora soothed her. "Now you're upset," she said tenderly. "Just you sit still and let me get you a little drink. Your poor nerves cannot stand up to these scenes yet." Swiftly she rose and poured out a wine-glassful of brandy from the decanter which she made sure stood in

readiness in the library at all hours. Another stood equally ready in the drawing-room, and a small flask in Lady Dingleby's bedroom. The habit was growing a little, and did the poor lady no harm!

Lady Dingleby took the glass and sipped away manfully—without any visible shiver. "I don't know what I should do without you, my dear," she said, gulping. "I cannot think . . . what came over Alaric."

Theodora looked at her mother-in-law speculatively. Only she knew how the whip had been laid about Alaric's shoulders since his return. How, when Mr. Proberty sent for him, as she had known he would, Alaric had at first evaded the issue, and sent back word that he was too busy. How at last Mr. Proberty had called at the house and insisted upon seeing Alaric, and of the scene which had followed between the two in the library. How Mr. Proberty, appalled at being called upon to meet a single cheque for ten thousand pounds, besides countless others for sums of varying hundreds, had warned Alaric in gravest tones that no fortune could stand up to such wilful extravagance—how, before he knew where he was, his fortune would be gone, and he would be left penniless, without this time a father to fall back upon. Mr. Proberty was one of the few persons to whom Alaric did not exhibit his appalling temper. He was frightened of the man—as he was frightened of staunch persons of balance and control—and in his ignorance he had a queer unformed terror that Mr. Proberty as the Law might conjure up some musty legal prognostication by which his income might be curtailed. Therefore, he listened, cowed and sullen, to the warnings and pronouncements which Mr. Proberty thought fit to utter . . . and took out his spite upon the household afterwards.

Theodora decided that it would be impolitic to mention much of this to Lady Dingleby. She waited while the widow drank her brandy, and then said gently, "I am afraid Alaric had some unhappy experience in London of which I know nothing. I can only tell you this. After our very happy time, he came suddenly into our rooms and ordered me to pack at once as we were leaving and would not return again."

Lady Dingleby's eyes were round with worry. "Oh, dear me," she fluttered, "what do you imagine could have happened? . . . something dreadful?. . . how alarming it all sounds . . . why did you never mention this to me before?"

"I did not want to cause you any unnecessary anxiety," said Theodora.

Lady Dingleby was so overcome by this intelligence that she required a little more brandy. This she was given, and thereafter she was helped up the stairs "to rest her poor head" and "lie down for a little."

Theodora went in search of Alaric and found that he had gone out. On foot. Alone.

He did not return for two days. When he did, he began painting furiously, and kept to his room for the best part of a week, roaring at any person who dared intrude upon his privacy, and getting the room into a filthy condition. He refused admittance to the servants, and only emerged when the odour became oppressive to himself.

When he did at last show himself to the household, he was unshaven and triumphant. He waved a sheaf of drawings at his wife and said in tones of intense self-gratification, "I have done wonderful work. These will make me another fortune." Whereupon he displayed the drawings, first to his wife, then to his mother, then to every member of the staff in turn, basking in the praise they bestowed upon him. The drawings were, in fact, quite well done. They were light black-and-whites of women. Girls standing on flights of stone steps, their white hands on the balustrades, banks of flowers behind them. Girls reclining in bowers, dreaming over their reflections in lakes, throwing morsels of bread to swans. Despite the cheapness of the themes, there was a certain second-rate charm about the execution which boded well for the work's commercial future.

After everyone had exhausted themselves in praising the work sufficiently, it was packed, sealed, and despatched to a man with whom Alaric had already made contact while in London, and when he had seen the coachman bearing the package towards the town, Alaric bathed himself and shaved, put on one of his new suits and came down to dinner with an air of great elegance and spiritual exhaustion.

"Did I tell you, dear?" ventured Lady Dingleby during dinner, when Alaric stopped speaking long enough to shovel some food into his mouth and on to the cloth, "did I tell you I have heard from Amelia?"

Alaric grunted.

"What did she say, Mother? Is she well? Does she enjoy herself?" Theodora supplied the questions.

Lady Dingleby nodded. "Yes, indeed. Very well . . . most delightful news . . ." She grimaced in the direction of Mabel, intending to signify restraint until they were alone.

"What's the matter with your face, Ma?" demanded Alaric. "Have you got toothache?"

"Certainly not." Lady Dingleby was affronted.

"Well, what were you going to say about Amelia?"

"After dinner, Alaric," said Theodora.

"Why not now?" He was mopping up gravy with a shred of bread.

Mabel left the room with a tray.

"Because," said Theodora hastily, "our private concerns are not a matter for the servants' ears."

"Is that what mother was pulling faces about?"

"Yes," said Theodora unwisely.

"I was not pulling faces . . . extremely rude . . . shan't tell you my news."

This Alaric could not bear. "That's all right, Ma," he said, almost attempting to placate her. "What's Amelia been getting up to. Is she getting married?"

Lady Dingleby said, "Oh!" in a tone of high disappointment, and Mabel returned to the room.

For the remainder of the meal Alaric suffered from what would be called in the nursery "the squirms."

He refused cheese, fidgeted irritably while his mother peeled a peach, and a very messy job the poor soul made of the business since, although the brandy might indeed be good for her nerves, it played havoc with the steadiness of her hands. At length, however, the meal came to an end. Alaric refused his port and followed the two women into the drawing-room, where he arranged himself on the hearthrug with an elbow upon the ornate mantelpiece and said, "Well, let's have it."

"You guessed," wailed Lady Dingleby, as Mabel closed the door. "Though I am sure I cannot tell how."

"Guessed what?" Alaric looked at his mother blankly.

"About Amelia."

"What about Amelia?"

While this unintelligent duet was maintained, Theodora put down her embroidery she had started and looked from one face to the other.

"I can't believe it," she gasped.

"Well, it's true. Quite soon . . . now what did I do with her letter . . . a Mr. Witherspoon . . ."

Alaric's eyes bulged, his mouth fell open. "D'you mean to tell me," he shouted, "that Amelia's landed a man?"

"Oh," shrieked Lady Dingleby, "Alaric . . . so coarse . . . how could you? . . . I really do beg you to moderate your language before your mama."

Theodora was looking at them still. "Then I suppose it means," she said slowly, "that according to the terms of the will Amelia and her Mr. Witherspoon will have to come back and live here?"

"Oh, yes," Lady Dingleby nodded her head vigorously, "of course, dear. We shall be quite a houseful, I imagine. But you'll manage, dear. You are such a beautiful manager. I declare things have never gone more smoothly."

There was something ghastly about the smile Theodora drove to her lips.

"Thank you, Mother," she said automatically. "You will give me your support then in respect of maintaining my position? I mean, you don't think Amelia will want to take my place. I have so dearly loved doing things for you."

Alaric regarded his wife curiously throughout this speech. He had not been witness to this particular side of her nature as yet, and the experience was surprising him.

"You like running this house, Theo?" he said sharply.

"Oh, yes," said Theodora. Her eyes were hidden. Her hands still. She seemed altogether remarkably still. As if she were listening for hidden vibrations with every nerve in her body.

"Then let's see Amelia and her Mr. Witherspoon try to move you out, my girl." He began to swagger. "I'm the son of the house and you are my wife. I'll soon show this Mr. Witherspoon who's the head of this house. Let him see. Whenever he wants to. When are they coming here, Ma?"

As he turned to his mother once more something of Theodora's tautness of body seemed to dissolve.

"I do hope," Lady Dingleby was fluttering, "that we are not going to have any trouble, Alaric."

"No one hopes that more than I," said Alaric with bemusing certainty. "I cannot afford to have my work interrupted . . . what else does Amelia say?"

Lady Dingleby emerged from the flurry of her thoughts and began to recount the details of Amelia's letter in her own remarkable fashion.

"The letter said . . . that is Amelia said . . . Mr. Witherspoon was a charming man. Quite the gentleman . . . refined and kindly . . . all over a charity bazaar . . . of course, being in mourning, Amelia should not have been there . . . as she was helper . . . not enjoying herself as it were. . . . Gussie thought it quite in order and a Mrs. Hobworthy whom I met, and a dear, kind, good soul, I'm sure, said it was all right. Amelia had no qualms . . . . and he was there . . . he assisted her with the cakes . . . handing them, I mean . . . it appears he asked leave to call . . . very bold . . . I hope he isn't bold, I haven't much fancy for really bold men . . . although your dear father was, I suppose, a bold man . . . masterful. . . ."

"What is he, Ma," said Alaric, cutting across this verbal feather-stitching.

"What is he? Oh, a man, dear . . . oh, I see what you mean. . . . Well, now, what did she say he was . . . something to do with butterflies and moths . . . writes little essays about them for nice papers . . . only quite nice papers, Gussie assured me in her letter, and the dear Vicar quite approves. A good man, and not too high church."

Lady Dingleby broke off and rapped her forehead with a dizzy finger. "Leppy something . . . now I'm sure that's what it was . . . leppy . . . leppy something or other it was."

"Haven't you the letter?" asked Theodora, embroidering rather fiercely.

"Now aren't I silly? Of course, I have the letter." She plunged her hand down into the bowels of her reticule and brought up the letter, slightly dogeared and entangled with tatting. "Now, where was that nice little bit. . . . Ah," she squealed triumphantly, "lepidopterist. . . . I knew it was leppy something . . . it is butterflies and moths."

"Means he goes prancing about with one of those nets and a bottle chasing things and smearing all the trees with treacle at night?"

"Oh, not treacle, dear, surely? So extravagant."

"That won't matter with a wife who's got fifty thousand pounds," snarled Alaric, suddenly irritable. "I think I shall take a turn, Mother. I don't feel well. I've been overworking. Too much of a strain on the creative brain. Well, you can wish Amelia well for us, but she needn't think I shall give her away, because I won't. Serve her right for the way she behaved to Theo." He crossed the room, said to Theodora, "Don't wait up for me, Theo, I may be late," and went marching out, doing the weary creative artist as he went, for his own particular amusement.

"Now we can have a cosy talk," said Lady Dingleby. She hesitated, "Do you think, dear, I could have a little of my—er—medicine? I feel quite exhausted after all this talking."

Theodora arose at once and gave her mother-in-law a glass of brandy.

"Now," she said, returning to the fire, "tell me all about it."

CHAPTER XIV

THE imminence of Amelia's wedding, and her subsequent return with her bridegroom to "Laurelston," promoted a further series of meetings for the family with Mr. Proberty. First, he wrote advising Lady Dingleby that he wished to call, and requesting her to name a convenient day and time. This interview was arranged without trouble, and went forward in unfruitful tranquillity. Mr. Proberty was concerned with three things.

He required Lady Dingleby's agreement to the administration of household affairs upon the new division according to the Will. Mr. and Mrs. Witherspoon would defray two-fifths of the joint commitments—servants, food and drink, light, and heat—Mr. and Mrs. Alaric two-fifths also, and Lady Dingleby the remaining fifth. Mr. Proberty also wished Lady Dingleby to vote a sum out of her inheritance for the repairs which were becoming glaringly necessary to the two hundred houses jointly owned by the family. Finally, he wished to know whether the widow was intending to donate a further sum to her daughter upon her marriage. To the last query she said, "No," with surprising firmness, and added, "Amelia has sufficient, I should say." This brooked no discussion, and Mr. Proberty reverted to the house problem which was, to him, the most important.

He knew considerably more than any member of the family about the prevailing conditions in such streets as The Rock. He was aware of the overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, unhealthy dampness, and having a genuine conscience about the living conditions of the poor the prosecution of this cause was exceedingly close to his kindly heart.

He sat with Lady Dingleby before the blazing fire in the library, warmed his veined hands at the blaze, and spoke earnestly and at some length.

"I am not approaching your ladyship solely in the capacity of your legal adviser," he began. "I will be honest with you in every respect, and confess that this is a matter which has my personal as well as my professional interest. These houses are filled with young children. As you know, the poor have many children. And for these children the conditions are tragic. The overcrowding alone is conducive to relations and intimacies which it is not proper or fitting for me to mention to your ladyship. Nevertheless, I do venture as far as to suggest that as a God-fearing woman it is not right for your ladyship to be in entire ignorance of the facts."

"Oh, dear," said Lady Dingleby. "Oh, dear. . . . Really, Mr. Pro-

berty . . . Sir Josiah always dealt with all such matters himself . . . really I do not feel that I am qualified."

She left her sentence suspended in mid-air, failed to disclose in what direction she was not qualified, looked excessively bothered, and wished that Theodora and the brandy were available. She lacked the courage to help herself from the decanter in the presence of the little lawyer.

"What I am trying to persuade your ladyship to do," Mr. Proberty went on, "is to give me authority, as your lawyer, to allocate a sum of money to the repairing and improving of these houses. It is in your own interest that this work should be done. If it is not done, and the properties continue to decay, there will come a day when they will be uninhabitable, and then the rents will cease."

"When?" said Lady Dingleby surprisingly.

"That I cannot say."

"Soon?"

"Maybe not in our lifetime. They might remain tenable for some years to come—they need not necessarily be condemned—but, as I have already told you, I am additionally concerned with the moral as well as the commercial aspect of this subject."

Lady Dingleby stared at the fire. "What did Sir Josiah have to say upon this matter, Mr. Proberty?" she asked.

Mr. Proberty looked distressed. "Sir Josiah was a very busy man," he hedged, "he did not see quite eye to eye with me on this matter. He was of the opinion, I regret to say, that the houses were good enough for the tenants."

"Then," said Lady Dingleby with triumph, "if Sir Josiah was satisfied, I must be also. He would not like to have me spend his money wildly, and in a manner that was opposed to his wishes." She relapsed into her musing, looked pleased that she had been so logical and sensible.

Mr. Proberty looked at her regretfully. "Is that your considered opinion?" he asked. "I was hoping to have received a different answer from your ladyship."

"I cannot bring myself to commit an act of spending which was not regarded favourably by my husband—it would not be right."

Mr. Proberty tried again. "As I have already indicated to your ladyship, Sir Josiah was excessively busy. He was a man of many interests and responsibilities. It is my view that he refused to do these repairs simply because he had not the time to give the matter his proper consideration."

"But can you prove that?"

"No, I regret that is impossible. I am only expressing my opinion. I am not able to do more than that."

"Sir Josiah was a very clever man," said Lady Dingleby, "very clever. He was not given to hasty opinion—not in business. He always said he never made a mistake, never had a failure. Is that not so?"

Mr. Proberty agreed.

Lady Dingleby's mood of composure was falling away from her. She began to look distraught. "Then I am afraid, Mr. Proberty . . .

Oh, dear, my head begins to spin. I am still far from well, you know. . . . I am afraid there is nothing more to be said . . . what was good enough for my dear husband . . . must satisfy me. . . . I wonder would you be so good as to pour me out a drop from that decanter. . . . I begin to feel quite faint."

Mr. Proberty rose and gave her the brandy for which she had been craving. The good man was most distressed. "I apologize most humbly for upsetting your ladyship," he said, and she took the glass wondering why she had not asked for it much sooner.

"Let no more be said . . . I beg . . . quite forgotten . . ." she said, sipping eagerly. And indeed she spoke with truth. The matter was forgotten. It slipped from her mind and was as dead to her as if the idea had never been conceived. Mr. Proberty's cause was foredoomed to failure, as was the future of the children in The Rock and the children in those other mean houses owned by the heirs of the late knight.

When Lady Dingleby became more composed, Mr. Proberty broached the other matter. Here he received permission early and a signature to the effect that "I, Amelia Dingleby, do hereby authorize and instruct . . ." The allocation of the household expenses was approved by the first party. Nothing else had been achieved.

* * * * *

Mr. Proberty wrote to Miss Amelia Dingleby and found that, after a fairly lengthy correspondence, she was agreeable to accepting two-fifths of the household commitments as her responsibility, on behalf of her future husband who would so soon be administrating her moneys, and then, rather wearily, and with distinct repugnance, Mr. Proberty set about tackling his interview with Alaric.

In the meantime, his first point gained, he again wrote to Amelia, asking her to donate a sum towards the houses, and again met with refusal. The text of the refusal was the same as Lady Dingleby's. "What was good enough for father is good enough for me." He knew, therefore, that his hopes of success with Alaric were non-existent.

However, he wrote for an interview. He was evaded and set aside for several weeks, and in the end he saw Alaric a few days before the wedding.

Alaric had settled down into the grooves of Easterbridge, if such a term may be applied to the volcanic uncertainties of his daily life. He had become generally disorderly in his appearance, and occasionally extremely elegant in the clothes purchased in London. He roamed the house in a paint-spotted smock, with the velvet beret draped over one eye, and had recently imported a Borzoi hound which went everywhere with him and had a temper as vicious and uncertain as his master's. Alaric's black and white drawings of women were selling, for small sums, with reasonable success, and he was earning for himself a certain amount of money. But his spending was fantastic. He began buying pictures—some valuable and expensive, others worthless and nearly as expensive because he knew nothing about real art, less about colour, and found it as difficult to appreciate as to

spell "perspective." He therefore spent several hundreds upon a dubious Corot, which was worth perhaps fifty or a hundred pounds less, and fifty pounds upon a lurid oil which was worth perhaps (for the frame) about a pound. He bought snuff-boxes, too—took to using snuff—and wore a dun-coloured film upon all his clothing which was particularly unattractive. The snuff-boxes were enshrined in an abominable Baroque cabinet, and a small shop on the fringes of the town made a very excellent thing out of him and his new hobby.

Mr. Proberty walked wearily up the drive, gave his hat to the new butler—Jellaby, as fat and flabby as his name suggested, with a breath which confirmed Mr. Proberty's suspicion that the new butler partook of the family wines.

Jellaby showed Mr. Proberty into the library, marched off to find Alaric, while the little lawyer sat down and attempted to fortify himself for the troubles to come.

They came—in the person of Alaric wearing his dressing-gown, red Morocco slippers and a fez with a long jade-green tassel and the Borzoi, very uncombed, and wearing a saddle of bright blue flannel, slightly askew. Alaric posed in the doorway, hand on dog, shuffled across the room, said, "Hello, Proberty!" in a defiant voice, which suggested that he knew "trouble" was coming, and the interview began.

As soon as the lawyer began speaking, Alaric got out of his chair and helped himself to brandy.

"I thought it might interest you to know just how much of your inheritance you have spent already," said Mr. Proberty, producing a list of figures.

"Tell you the truth, Mr. Proberty," said Alaric, "it doesn't interest me at all. I am making a very good thing out of my drawings—a very good thing indeed. Only the other day my agent wrote to me and said I was a coming man—and if I spend a little to-day I shall make it to-morrow, so it really doesn't signify." He finished his brandy and put the glass on the floor.

"Very well," said Mr. Proberty, placing the paper on the mantelpiece. "I leave these figures with you in the hope that you may care to peruse them later. Your money is not inexhaustible, Mr. Alaric."

"Maybe not, maybe not," shrugged Alaric, "but I can make more—much more."

"Very well." Mr. Proberty's mouth was tight-drawn. "There is just one matter I should like to revive. The houses. . . ."

"If you want me to spend money on them," said Alaric, "my answer's no, same as it was before. My money's not inexhaustible—you just told me so yourself. I can't afford to go about ornamenting slums for drunkards and wastrels, so you had better not waste your time trying to make me. It's improvident. That's what it is," the phrase appeared to please him, yes—improvident!"

Mr. Proberty realized he was beaten. He knew further combat was futile. He lifted his shoulders in a funny little gesture of surrender and said quite quietly, "Very well, Mr. Alaric, we will say no more about it,"

after which he broached the matter of the household expenses, had a heated and inconsequential argument, got very red in the face and very strained in his patience, and finally managed to extract a signature from his client before his temper broke down altogether.

When Alaric had scrawled "Alaric Dingleby" with ill-disguised displeasure, he got up, said insolently, "That is all, I hope," and walked out of the room, leaving Mr. Proberty to see himself off the premises.

Neither Lady Dingleby, nor Alaric, nor Amelia knew that they were at fault. The idea would have sounded fantastic to them if it had been broached. They did not know either of what crime they could be accused. They would have been affronted at any suggestion of their guilt towards the occupants of those houses in The Rock, some of whom were sick, some who were out of work, some who were thieves, and some who whored. In the opinion of the Dinglebys they were not responsible for the deplorable behaviour of the poor!

CHAPTER XV

MR. PROBERTY and Mr. Heatherstead were friends. They belonged to the Easterbridge Conservative Association and Club. They met at this club once a week to play a game of billiards together and discuss local affairs, and they met once a week at Mr. Heatherstead's house to eat supper and drink a glass of punch before a roaring fire in Mr. Heatherstead's study. Mr. Heatherstead was an expert on punch. He always mixed it himself. He always referred to Mr. Pickwick while he was mixing it, and the rum and the lemons and the sugar and the nutmeg and the little copper kettle on the hob were as much a part of himself as his dusty velvet jacket and his embroidered smoking-cap.

Over their punch the two gentlemen spoke of intimate matters. Of books, and Mr. Heatherstead's current book in particular. Of poets and essayists. Of Sam Johnson and Shakespeare—particularly of Shakespeare. It was Mr. Heatherstead's delight to lie back in a shabby arm-chair with a steaming glass of punch in his hand and a pipe between his teeth and dissertate upon his beloved Will. He always commenced in the same manner.

"Proberty," he would say, "Proberty—Will has the answer for them all. There's never a man born, nor woman either, that one cannot find his counterpart in Shakespeare."

This was his favourite axiom. He never tired of proving its worth. "He knew men," he would say, "and he knew women. He had 'em all in his plays, all of 'em, rogues and vagabonds . . . they were all there. . . ."

One evening, several months after Mr. Proberty's attempt to extract money from the Dinglebys, the two men sat together as usual over the fire. The punch was mixed and steaming in the glasses. Their pipes were drawing, the fire was leaping wonderfully. The curtains were close-drawn, the chairs set conveniently on either side of the broad hearth, the lamps were lit, and the house was peacefully, calmly silent.

Mr. Heatherstead had finished his book. All the information likely to appeal to travellers had been collected and sorted, written and revised, and now the finished manuscript, fair copied in Truslove's copperplate handwriting, lay upon his table, ready for the publishers.

"I only wish," Mr. Heatherstead said, sighing a little, "I only wish that I might find a way in which I might persuade my publishers to purchase a little book upon the slum conditions in this town."

"Ah," said Mr. Proberty, "there you have a great need, a crying need. Not that I believe it is confined to this town, mark you," he added.

Mr. Heatherstead agreed. "Of course not. But it always seems worse to one when it occurs under one's nose. It is an alarming fact that tragedy grows smaller as the distance grows between it and oneself, but it *is* a fact."

Mr. Proberty sipped at his punch and decided to unburden himself of a story.

"I never discuss clients, naturally," he began, "but I am inclined to lapse from grace to-night."

"Ha," said Mr. Heatherstead, "h'm. Two old women over the fire! Well, who's the offender? Anyone I know?"

Mr. Proberty hummed about a bit and then admitted, "Yes, the Dinglebys, chiefly young Alaric."

"That mountebank! Shakespeare would have cast him for Pistol."

"Mountebanks *can* cause a lot of trouble."

"I didn't know the Dinglebys owned much property in slum dwellings."

"Well, they do," said Mr. Proberty grimly. He went on to outline the conditions of the Will, looking very guilty, very uncomfortable, very wroth, and very flushed all at the same time. He told his old friend of his appeals to his three clients, and of his failure to extract any money at all."

"Mr. Heatherstead screwed his eyes up in an effort of memory, and said, "There's a wedge of their houses down The Rock?"

"There is."

"Where that deplorable Sedge woman lives?"

"She lives in a Dingleby house—so, for that matter, does Burrage. His wife ran off with a soldier some months ago and left him with two children and a baby—the baby is now dead. It died of pneumonia, as a change from tuberculosis."

"What do I know about Mrs. Sedge?" asked Mr. Heatherstead.

"That she lives with a succession of lodgers, has two appalling infants, Perce and Polly, and is expecting another. I don't think there *is* much else to know about the woman. She's a slut—in a hovel—and whether she would have been such a slut if she hadn't always lived in such a hovel I am not prepared to say."

Mr. Heatherstead stared reflectively at the diminishing punch in his glass. "You remind me of my own shortcomings," he said slowly. "What do you know that I do not about my tenants the Soameses?"

Mr. Proberty finished his punch and stroked his small stomach lovingly.

"You are a master punch-maker," he said, nodding his approval like a small idol. "What do I know about the Soameses? Do you mean the Bert Soameses?"

"Yes."

"I know Soames is out of work."

Mr. Heatherstead sat up with a jerk, "Well, I did not. That accounts for the pinched look on that woman's face! What's being done for them? Damme, that woman's proud. *Proud*, mark you! She's never let on to me and I'm there every Saturday morning to collect the rent."

Mr. Proberty, who knew everything about everyone, launched himself happily into a narrative of the Soameses tragedy, and concluded with the dismal words, "And Bert is up at workhouse wheeling barrows of soil every day—for bread."

"Well, in heaven's name!" said Mr. Heatherstead, looking as though he intended leaping out of his chair and going down to The Rock instantly, slippers, smoking jacket, cap, and all, "what have they done to get the money for their rent? For, I tell you, they have paid me regularly."

Mr. Proberty told of Charlie's activities. Of the manure barrow and the grocery round—of the organ pumping and the holding of horses' heads. . . .

"There must be an end to all *that*," said Mr. Heatherstead. "Now where can we get employment for the man?"

He got out of his chair and stamped up and down the room several times looking quite fierce. Then he came back to the fire, seized the kettle, recharged the glasses, and said, "He shall work here . . . and so shall the boy. He shall go into the greengrocery line of business. This garden is far too large for my use. Soames can grow vegetables and sell them—at least, the boy can sell them—and later, if we can get the man back to his own line of trade, the boy can carry on."

The swift nod of approval which Mr. Proberty brought to this decision was almost instantly overcast. "Helping the Soameses," he said drily, "while laudable in the extreme, contributes in no way at all to our problem."

"The Dinglebys' houses?"

"Not only their houses. I particularize those because their administration is partially in my hands. There are many more, owned by others in this town, as we know well enough."

Mr. Heatherstead nodded. "Can nothing be done officially?"

Mr. Proberty raised his eyebrows. "Against the magistrates, and the biggest of our tradesmen, the owners of the largest houses, and the pillars of the local church."

"No," said Mr. Heatherstead, "on the face of, nothing can be done, and yet . . ."

"And yet," said his friend, draining his glass, "I refuse to admit while I live that the case of those poor wretches is hopeless."

* * * * *

On the following morning he gave himself the immense pleasure of announcing his intention to the Soameses. He asked himself into the kitchen, picked his way over a pair of death-locked infants who were engaged in a nothing-barred, all-in wrestling contest, took the seat offered to him by Minnie, and told her what he had in mind. He endured the single outburst of rather dry tears from the woman, grunted a few words of embarrassed consolation, reduced the rent a shilling a week, and came out feeling at least partially at peace with himself and the world. Later in the day, through Tommy Cottle's aunt, who got it from Tommy, who had heard it from Rose at the back door, the news of Amelia's "marryin' " spread through The Rock and the comments were many and various.

* * * * *

Easterbridge saw nothing of the wedding. Amelia returned to her home town as Mrs. Witherspoon. Mr. Witherspoon accompanied her. The couple came back after spending a month taking the waters at Bath. Someone had advised Amelia that these waters possessed curative powers which would do wonders for red noses. She, therefore, took her red nose and her bridegroom to Bath, and returned home in improved spirits—but still with a red nose.

Theodora had thought long and earnestly as to what manner she should adopt towards her sister-in-law and her husband. After considerable inward debate, she decided upon the bold attack, backed by the growing intimacy between herself and her mother-in-law. Lady Dingleby, growing daily more fond towards her brandy, was inclining similarly towards Theodora, to whom she deferred in all matters, and who, in company with Mrs. Blossom, quite controlled the household. The relations between Theodora and Alaric were deplorable. Alaric alternated between ignoring his wife and sleeping in his studio and being possessive with his wife and sleeping in her room. Theodora endured both moods with equal patience and spent a great deal of time with Lady Dingleby. Here she found a slight measure of opposition in the person of Victoria, who endeavoured to lessen the brandy addiction, but as fortune had smitten the woman with a bad attack of bronchitis before she could return from Mrs. Foote's house, Theodora had gained sufficient time to inculcate the widow with her new obsession before the maid returned to interfere. The position gradually worsened. Lady Dingleby became pleasantly fuddled by early afternoon, drowsed before the fire in her room until tea-time, received her elderly acquaintance quite passably for an hour or so, and returned to her room for a reviver. By dinner-time her state was vague, by bed-time she was bemused. . . . Alaric was too indifferent to notice, Victoria not strong enough to interfere, and there was no one else.

Things were in this state when Amelia came home. On the day of her arrival, Theodora saw to it that the bedroom brandy bottle was thinned with water, persuaded Lady Dingleby that her head was bad, and, after luncheon, got the old lady on to the bed and the brandy out of

the room soon enough to ensure complete sobriety by tea-time—the time of Amelia's arrival. She then retired to her own room, dressed herself in the buff and sable costume, and went along to her husband's studio.

The door was locked. She knocked upon it and called, "Alaric, let me in, dear—it's Theo. I want to speak to you."

There was a sound as of a chair scraping, footfalls, and the key turned in the lock.

"Working," mumbled Alaric, obviously newly awakened from sleep. "What is it, Theo?"

Theo came into the room and closed the door. "Amelia is returning this afternoon," she said quietly. "As *master* of the house," she laid on the emphasis strongly, "I felt sure you would like to have sufficient warning. I knew you would want to change. You wouldn't like to feel at a disadvantage before your new brother-in-law."

Alaric swallowed this diplomacy. "Yes, of course," he said hastily. He looked at his wife. "You look well enough," he said, eyeing her. He reached out and took hold of her shoulders. "You look very well. . . ."

Wearily Theodora accepted the implication.

"Not now, Allie," she said, "we haven't much time. I thought if you would tell me what you wanted to wear I would lay out your things."

Alaric looked sulky. "Not very loving, are you?" he grumbled. "Couldn't blame a man if he began to look elsewhere. . . ." Alaric always gave himself away. As if some innate indecency encouraged him to boast of his infidelities. He could not bear that they should be kept away from his wife's ears. It enraged him that she ignored them. She knew now that he was referring to his latest affair with a barmaid at the "Star Tavern," a blowzy ex-actress with dyed hair.

She took the hint, however. Said smilingly, "I should hate to think such a thing of you. Now, what would you like to wear," and looked around the room, noting the incredible disorder.

"I have been rearranging the room," said Alaric, noting her glances. He was always rearranging the room. The lacquer, and the buddhas, the Chinese lamps and the Japanese prints, the Burmese trays (from Manchester), and the Persian vases, everything travelled from wall to wall and from corner to corner, mirroring the instability of a mind that was never in order, a spirit that was never at peace. "Looks nice, doesn't it?"

"Very nice, dear."

The windows were tightly shut. The grate was unswept and the burned embers lay about dustily. The room smelt of smoke, stale incense, and dog. The Borzoi slept upon the divan and rarely went out, therefore the dog smell was predominant. Already the rich hangings looked dusty and the tables were ringed and spotted.

"Now, what shall it be?" she persisted.

"I'll come along with you." Alaric whistled for the dog. "Venus and I will decide." Venus, the Borzoi, stalked unwillingly towards him and the trio went out of the room.

One hour later, Theodora came down the stairs, having managed to

get her husband dressed at last. The bell pealed, Jellaby opened the front door. They had arrived.

Instantly Theodora swept forward. Her manner was welcoming—friendly—and very dignified.

"My dear Amelia, my dear Mrs. Witherspoon," she said smilingly, "may I be the first to welcome you to your own home."

Amelia looked considerably taken aback, gave her sister-in-law a sharp look and decided to meet her half-way.

"Thank you, Theodora," she said. "Clarence, let me present you."

Clarence—Mr. Witherspoon—came weaving towards them, bending from the waist and flapping his hands like a performing seal. He was a tapering figure, really not unlike a seal, in his dark glossy garments with his silk hat glimmering, his luxuriant whiskers and the expression of bewildered pomposity upon his absurd little face.

"Mrs. Dingleby, I presume," he said, and bowed low over her hand. Mabel appeared and began to descend the steps with Jellaby.

Theodora murmured, "Excuse me," and said in tones of indisputable authority, "Take Mr. and Mrs. Witherspoon's things to their suite, Jellaby. See that the fire is burning well and inform Mrs. Blossom that we will take tea. Where would you like tea, Amelia! In the drawing-room or the library?"

"The drawing-room," said Amelia, staring.

"Very well. Tea in the drawing-room, Jellaby, and ask Mrs. Blossom to have the goodness to step up to my room in one hour's time." Theodora turned to the arrivals, "If you will lead the way, Amelia?" She laid her fingers lightly upon Mr. Witherspoon's arm and waited for her sister-in-law.

Hypnotized by the whole performance, Amelia obeyed. Theodora said over her shoulder, "Kindly see to it that her ladyship and Mr. Dingleby are advised of Mr. and Mrs. Witherspoon's arrival." The three then disappeared into the drawing-room.

"Poor mother," said Theodora, as Mr. Witherspoon closed the door, "is far from well. She rests a great deal. But she is coming down to tea to mark her gladness at your happy union. It's really sad to see how she has declined. I worry about her a good deal. She leans upon me so! You know, Amelia, it is most gratifying to me how much dear mother leans upon me—it's Theo this and Theo that from morning till night. I never had the joy of remembering my own mother. You cannot imagine what a consolation it is to me!"

Having thus clarified her position and intentions beyond any possible doubt to her sister-in-law, Theodora began questioning them upon their journey, and altogether succeeded in impressing the idiotic Mr. Witherspoon, and make his bride feel that she were a guest in her own house, but such a well-received and much-honoured guest that there was absolutely nothing she could do to find fault with the situation.

Then Lady Dingleby arrived, followed soon afterwards by Alaric. The bridegroom was handed from one to the other for examination and address . . . and the buttered toast went round. Lady Dingleby's hand

was shaking slightly as she helped herself. Theodora saw that Amelia had noticed, managed to catch her eyes, and raised her eyebrows significantly. Mr. Witherspoon began speaking.

"Dear Mother . . . I may be permitted the honour of addressing you so? I thank you. My dear Mother, I hope and trust that now I have the honour to become one of this distinguished family you will permit me to observe that in all matters I am at your service, willing and anxious to prove my worth." Here he indulged in a shrill titter, as if he had said something funny, and added, "Not that I imagine so wealthy and distinguished a family will ever be in need of *my* small services. But they are there at all times should it be needful to summon them. I am a simple man, as my dear wife will tell you. I lead a simple life. I believe in simplicity. I reverence it." He clasped his pudgy hands and lifted his protuberant eyes upwards. "I am a child at heart, a simple child, and my needs, too, are simplicity itself. Just my dear wife, my dear home, my dear personal possessions around me, and the pursuit of my dear hobby and profession, these are all I ask from life."

"Ah," said Lady Dingleby, clutching at a recollection, "the leppy, leppy . . ."

"Lepidoptera," said Mr. Witherspoon, "my little butterflies and moths. My life's work. Presently, when my collection arrives, I hope to have the honour of displaying it to you."

At this point, Alaric, becoming more and more impatient at his exclusion from the conversation, cut swiftly into the short pause.

"Beats me how you manage to catch 'em," he said, "or what you see in 'em when they're caught," he added rudely.

"Ah, now there you have my little secret," said Mr. Witherspoon, wagging a fat finger and appearing quite unaffronted. "In this county, which I confess I have never visited before, I find myself doubly blessed, in that my dear wife springs from its bosom and that it is the happy hunting ground of some of the most interesting and valuable of the specie. I refer to the Small Blue. I have, of course, a number of specimens, but I hope during the rich years to come to add to my collection by obtaining many variations. It is the variations, you know, which make up the prizes of a collection. The differences of marking upon the little fairy wings, the alteration of a dot, the dimming or added brilliance of a colour . . . most exciting . . . now I recollect an occasion when I was in Norfolk. . . ."

He rambled on almost without pause. He wafted a strip of buttered toast, he stabbed the air with it, he leaned forward in his chair and made small lunges at Alaric with it, and finally, after an incredible peroration, he popped it, stone cold, into his mouth and gobbled it like a gander.

"I paint," said Alaric, almost exploding at the strain of silence. "I am an artist. I will show *you my* work. I have just completed what I can say with pride is a work of considerable merit. A delicate, lovely thing—I am a romanticist. . . ."

The three ladies remained silent, and the conversation degenerated

into a spirited race between the brothers-in-law for monopoly, in which, to Theodora's inward amusement, Alaric came a poor second.

When Mabel came to remove the tea-things, Lady Dingleby was nodding in her chair. Amelia was fidgeting. Only Theodora maintained an unruffled calm. Presently she rose and suggested that the couple might like to go to their rooms for a brief rest before dinner.

"Besides which," she said lightly, "we mustn't be selfish. We have dearly loved mother staying down so long with us but we must not strain her overmuch. She must rest before dinner if we are not to undo the good work which we have already done in restoring her to health."

"Eh?" said Lady Dingleby, awakening with a start. "Oh . . . dear . . . I must have dropped off . . . you really must excuse me . . . Theo, my love . . . might I trouble you . . . your arm . . . feel in need of a little rest . . ." She looked about her vaguely, passed the tip of her tongue over her lips thirstily, and attempted to rise. Very gently Theodora assisted her.

"Of course, everyone will excuse you," she said. "Now, come along, Mother, and if you go to sleep like a good girl you shall come down and dine with us and perhaps we will play a little game of patience after dinner."

* * * * *

When the brandy had been produced and the widow supplied liberally, Theodora, leaving the bottle on the table well within reach, returned to the drawing-room and found her husband, as she had expected, pacing angrily to and fro, working himself into one of his fantastic rages.

"The man's an idiot," he said shrilly, "a lunatic . . . that dreadful voice . . . those hands . . . that laugh. To think . . . condemned to have him in the house always. My God, Amelia's paid a pretty price for a wedding-ring . . . never listened to a word I said . . . nothing but butterflies . . . butterflies . . . pah. . . ."

"I think," said Theodora composedly, "he will do very well. He's very grateful to Amelia for making him secure . . . he will be out all summer hunting for his wretched little insects, and as we need never use these rooms except for entertaining, we need see nothing of him that we do not wish except at meals. I disagree with you, Alaric. Such a man will never dispute *your* authority."

Alaric swung his monocle by its cord. . . . "There's something in that," he said grudgingly, dropping his voice a tone, "but he upsets me for all that. I *am* upset. I think I shall go out. You can say I have been sent for . . . urgent business. . . ." As he spoke Alaric edged towards the door, ensuring his departure before any dispute could be made. "I am really quite worn out with his prattle . . . I will see you later . . . but don't wait up for me. No, don't wait up for me." He went out and closed the door, leaving his wife alone.

She was standing by the mantelpiece. Slowly she turned and examined her face in the large mirror. It was quite calm. Her hair was elaborately

dressed, her throat still smooth, and except for the two thin lines on either side of her face she did not look any older than her years. Her eyes burned oddly, but that was nothing—it might easily have been no more than a reflection from the fire, into which she had previously been gazing.

* * * * *

It was about two weeks after the Witherspoons' arrival that Theodora ordered the carriage for eleven a.m. and went off into the town without asking Amelia to accompany her.

It was Theodora's custom to use the carriage in the mornings twice a week. On these occasions she carried a long list, containing items required by Mrs. Blossom, items required by her mother-in-law, and items for her personal needs. Since Amelia's return she had been joined by her on these trips. It was, therefore, surprising that Theodora had not told her of this particular journey.

Jellaby followed her out to the carriage with the list, some books for the lending library, neatly strapped together, and a foot-warmer.

The footman received this last item, arranged it and the fur rug—the autumn mornings were considered chilly—and the carriage set off.

Jellaby had inquired, "Where to, madam?" and Theodora had answered, "Oh, drive straight into the town and I'll decide where I wish to stop."

When they were clear of the drive, she prodded the coachman with her parasol, said, "Drive to Mr. Proberty's office," and sat rather tensely awaiting her arrival.

She was shown straight into Mr. Proberty's office. She took the chair which he brought forward for her, agreed that the mornings were becoming "quite sharp" and asked after the little lawyer's health. Mr. Proberty then asked after Lady Dingleby, and Theodora began, "Lady Dingleby has never been well, you know, since Sir Josiah's death. She does not enjoy good health. I am here this morning at her particular request."

Mr. Proberty waited.

"Lady Dingleby has expressed a wish to see you privately upon a matter concerning her will."

Mr. Proberty nodded several times and made a note on a small pad at his elbow.

"Lady Dingleby wishes to make a will," she told him.

"I have asked her ladyship several times," said Mr. Proberty. "She has heretofore expressed a wish that the matter be left in abeyance. I am glad she now wishes it arranged. When should I call?"

Theodora was most particular about this. "It is her ladyship's wish that you call in the morning. About eleven o'clock. Not later—or earlier. At eleven. She will receive you in her room. She seldom leaves her room now. I trust that will be convenient?"

Mr. Proberty assured her it would be perfectly convenient. Theodora made a good impression upon him. She spoke affectionately and thought-

fully of her mother-in-law. She was quiet and composed. He wondered privately what sort of life she endured with her husband, decided that perhaps she knew how to manage him, had for a moment a fleeting instinct to approach her in the matter of the repairs to the houses, thought better of the impulse, and, as she signified that her call was over, rose and showed her to the outer door. He stood and watched her carriage roll off down the street and then went back into his office. Theodora completed her shopping and went home. Three days later Mr. Proberty called.

Theodora was in the hall—she said how convenient it was that she had just come from her interview with the housekeeper and was at his disposal. She led him straight up the stairs and along the corridor to Lady Dingleby's room.

Victoria was in the room. Lady Dingleby sat beside the fire in a large chair. A chair was drawn for Mr. Proberty, Victoria was dismissed, and after a few affectionate words in which she enjoined her mother-in-law not to overtax her strength and Mr. Proberty to be very gentle with her, Theodora, too, left the room and the lawyer and his client were left together.

"I understand you wish me to draw up a will for your ladyship?"

Lady Dingleby had been staring into the fire. She gave a little start, looked rather vaguely at the lawyer, and then said, making a small continous sideways movement with her head, "Ah, yes. . . . that is right . . . my will. Quite a simple will. . . ."

Mr. Proberty remained for about half an hour, when Theodora came back and escorted him to the door. He saw no one else. He agreed to return with the will in a few days' time. Theodora was most particular that he should return at the same hour.

When he had gone she went back to her mother-in-law and inquired how she did.

"My head aches," said Lady Dingleby. "I think perhaps, dear, a little drink." The wavering hands came forward appealingly. "Could I have a little drink?"

"I don't think you should, Mother . . . you know I don't think you should until after lunch."

"But I want a drink, dear . . . a little drink of my medicine. . . ."

Theodora went slowly across the room and took the brandy bottle from the cupboard.

"What did you tell Mr. Proberty?" she asked slowly.

"Eh? . . . tell Mr. Proberty . . . why, my love . . ." her eyes were on the brandy bottle . . . "as I promised you . . . everything to you . . everything . . . with my grateful thanks for all your devotion . . . can I have a drink now?"

"Yes," said Theodora. "You can have a drink now. . . ." The bottle was newly opened. When the wineglass was filled the bottle was still full to the shoulder. She drew up a small table and left the bottle within reach. "Now I'm going to leave you for a little while. Promise me you won't touch any more! Promise, now."

"I promise, dear . . . of course . . . I wouldn't dream . . ." The eager fingers closed around the stem of the glass. "You won't be long, will you?"

"No, I won't be long."

Theodora's petticoats rustled across the room, out of the door. The door closed. Victoria was coming along the passage. "Oh, Victoria," she said, "her ladyship wishes to be left undisturbed until she rings. Would you see that the other servants are told?"

She waited while the woman turned around and went towards the back staircase, then she went swiftly to Amelia's sitting-room and remained in conversation with her for the rest of the morning.

When she returned to her mother-in-law the bottle was two-thirds empty. Lady Dingleby was quite drunk.

CHAPTER XVI

It was some weeks later that Theodora made her very bad mistake. The day had been unpleasant. Outside, the persistent rain dripped dolorously upon the autumn-faded garden, drenching the stone figures and the frost-touched dahlias, soaking the arbours and dropping downwards unbrokenly into the thick bands of shrubbery. Once the head gardener had crossed the lawn with a sack over his head and a basket of marrows on his arm. Once the brooding silence of the driveway had been broken by the clattering feet of the errand boy Tommy, and once a venturesome blackbird had flurried across the grass on a swift, protesting journey from one clump of evergreen to another. These things apart, the rain was a veil dividing the outer world from "Laurelston," in a lonely desolation. The house itself was like a prison; a self-chosen prison in which each of the principal occupants had imposed a sentence of solitary, or semi-solitary, confinement upon themselves.

Lady Dingleby kept to her room. She seldom left it now. The brandy in the bottle at her elbow diminished steadily while, between sips, she drowsed before the fire.

Alaric kept to his studio, busily painting a rather beautiful bronze idol with frightful varnishes of blue and yellow.

Amelia and her husband kept to their sitting-room, where Amelia was doing feather-stitching upon the bodice of a small flannel garment, while her husband set butterflies. These he withdrew one by one with small pincers from their winter quarters in a relaxing tin, where they lay in neat rows on beds of cotton-wool.

Amelia was pregnant. She was intensely proud of her state. She had already had three intimate conferences with her doctor, and had supplied Theodora with a time-table of special beverages with which she was to be supplied throughout the day. A glass of warm milk at ten a.m., a glass of port with a raw egg beaten into it at noon, tea made with milk at four p.m., another glass of port and egg at six-thirty, and Benger's Food for a nightcap at ten o'clock. As a result of these additions to her already rich

diet, the expectant mother was bespattered with spots and suffered from chronic indigestion, which made her nose redder than ever. However, she at least was content.

Theodora sat in her room writing out a list for her shopping expedition on the morrow. This task completed, she braced herself for the unpleasant monthly necessity of extracting a few pounds of ready money from her husband's purse. It was a labour of Hercules. Nevertheless, the list completed, she left her desk and went down the passage to her husband's room. In answer to her knock, Alaric bade her enter. He looked up from his painting, said, "Hello, Theo, what do you think of my mysterious lady from the East? Looks better for a touch of colour, don't she?" and allowed himself to be soothed by his wife's agreement.

Theodora averted her eyes from the horror, sat down on a chair, after removing some stale biscuits and a plate of dog's meat. She began, "It's the first of the month, dear. May I have my pin money?"

"What, again?" said Alaric, painting very busily. "What have you done with last month's?"

"I have spent it, my dear. Now I require some more."

Alaric laid down his brush and leaned back. "Tell you the truth, Theo, I'm deuced tight at the moment. We've spent a lot of money, you know. We shall have to draw in our horns a bit."

Theodora looked at the pile of newly unpacked snuff-boxes on a nearby table and she hardened her heart.

"I would like ten pounds, Alaric, please," she said firmly. "I think you can afford that."

"Ten pounds, whatever for? I cannot see what you need money for at all! Proberty pays all the household bills, and God knows they're high enough. You have more clothes than you can ever hope to wear." His face became crafty, "Why not sell some of your jewels? I'm sure you'll never wear them—now."

"I shall never sell your gifts to me," said Theodora. "Moreover, you must remember, I have certain obligations upon my purse. I need silks for my embroidery, money for my library subscription, gloves, stockings."

"I thought you had already bought gloves and stockings enough to last for ever," he avoided, using the word "London."

"Gloves and stockings wear out," Theodora reminded him. "Mine are worn out. I cannot call on your friends in mended gloves."

"My friends!" Alaric snorted. "A lot I care for the pettifogging fogeys around here that you and mother know."

Theodora kept her patience admirably. "It is necessary for me to keep up appearances, Alaric, as you are well aware."

"I don't think I've got any money in the house," Alaric said, trying a new line.

"Well, then, I am going into the town to-morrow morning. If you will give me your authority at the bank I will call there."

"Oh, can't you leave it now? You can see I am busy. Some other time, Theo, what does one day matter?"

"Because," said Theodora, playing her last card, "Amelia asked me to accompany her in the morning. She requested me to loan her a sovereign this morning and I had to confess I had no money. She was distinctly rude; about you, I mean. She said *her* Mr. Witherspoon would not like to have her without money for an instant."

"Then why hadn't she got a sovereign?"

"Because she had spent her money, until she went into the town, and she showed me his authority for twenty pounds."

"Of her own money," snarled Alaric.

"Well, it belongs to her husband now, dear."

"I shouldn't think," said Alaric, "that you find it pleasant to remember that you came to *me* without a penny."

"No," said Theodora, her voice very low, "I do not like to be reminded of it. Least of all by Amelia."

"Damn Amelia!" snarled Alaric. "How much did you say you wanted?" He drew a gilt box towards him and lifted the lid. It was filled with gold. "Nine pounds did you say?"

"Ten pounds, please, Allie."

He counted out the money very slowly. "Now don't come asking me for any more, and I beg you not to interrupt me when I'm working. It disturbs my train of thought. It's nothing but money, money, money from morning till night. . . . His voice began to rise.

Theodora took the sovereigns and held them in her hand. "Thank you, Allie," she said. "Thank you very much indeed. I will loan Amelia her sovereign and then she will know my husband *does* keep me supplied."

Alaric grunted. "Yes, do that, but mind you get it back."

Then Theodora made her mistake. She got half-way to the door, turned, and paused. "Allie," she said.

"What is it now?"

"Who was it that was here, just after your father's death, with that touring company?"

Alaric looked up—surprised.

"What makes you ask?"

"I just wondered. I had forgotten the name."

"D'you mean Louie Leventhall?"

"Of course. How silly of me! Yes, that's the name, Louie Leventhall."

"You're not thinking of going back to the boards, are you, just because I asked you to economise?" There was alarm in his voice. "That wouldn't do at all. Look as though our marriage was a failure . . . start people talking . . . make me look a fool." Again his voice rose.

Theodora regretted her query very rapidly. "No, I never gave a moment's thought to such a thing. It never crossed my mind."

"Well, then, why did you think about it at all?"

Theodora hesitated.

"Well, you're making some mystery. I insist on being told!"

"There is no mystery," Theodora told him wearily. "It was merely that

I saw Louie Leventhall's name on a playbill in the town two days ago and I could not remember whether it was his company that was here or not."

She went out of the room, holding the money, and feeling angry with herself for being such a fool. But the mischief was done. With all the fiendish accuracy of life's superlative timing, she had told Alaric of the presence of the little Jew at a time when his boredom was chafing him like a hair shirt. Temporarily, even spending wearied him. He disliked his brother-in-law, who had twice contradicted him in one week and gone on to prove that his contradictions were justified; he was galled that his sister was pregnant and that his wife was not, although he disliked children and regarded them as a nuisance; and his interest in the barmaid at the "Star" was wearing thin. He sat at his table and stared at the blotched idol. "I wonder if Annabelle Anise is still with the company," he thought restlessly.

Half an hour later he had changed into one of his lounge suits, put on his fur-lined overcoat, filled his cigar-case, and was down the stairs and out of the house a few moments before the gong sounded for luncheon. He was on his way to the theatre.

* * * * *

Both Louie Leventhall and Annabelle Anise had been considerably put out that their little scheme had come to nothing on their last visit to Easterbridge. They had not dared to visit "Laurelston" so soon after Sir Josiah's death, so that they had been forced to continue their tour without seeing Alaric again. Since then the company had been disbanded. Miss Anise had gone out on tour with *East Lynne,* returned to London when the company dried up, played a season in pantomime at Streatham, and once more joined up with Mr. Leventhall in the summer, after a long and unwelcome period of "resting."

It was expressly to see Alaric that Leventhall had again booked Easterbridge, and now, on this Wednesday morning, half-way through their week, when he had been unable to discover anything about Alaric's whereabouts, he was saying to Miss Anise, over a glass of porter, "I shall go up there to-morrow; I shall call. It can do no harm and something might come of it." Five minutes later Alaric strode into the bar parlour in all the glory of his expensive clothing. His welcome was rapturous.

"How well you look!" exclaimed Louie, rising to his feet and shaking Alaric warmly by the hand.

"How handsome you look," added Annabelle coyly. "I declare, Alaric, you quite dazzle my poor eyes."

Alaric beamed and told her her eyes were wonderful. He then called for drinks and sat himself down beside Miss Anise who was extremely annoyed inwardly that she was not wearing her best. Nothing was said about business. Names flew between them, and dates. Reminiscences of this and that tour, gossip about one actor and another. The time

passed most pleasantly. They adjourned to a nearby hotel and ate luncheon, in a dining-room which was emptied of everyone else, as the legitimate luncheon hour was long passed. Annabelle suggested that they should go to her rooms for tea, that Alaric should see the show, and these suggestions were found "totally delightful" and therefore accepted with willingness. Annabelle hurried on ahead to make some purchases and cozen the landlady, while Alaric followed more slowly with Mr. Leventhall, discussing the relative merits of Mr. Tree and Mr. Irving, while both smoked Alaric's cigars.

Tea was an elaborate meal, served in the lodgings' combined room. Alaric partook heavily and crumbily, and when he had finished he dusted himself off and said warmly, "Y'know, I'm going to tell you both something." As he had hardly stopped speaking since he met them, this seemed superfluous. However, he went on to say, "I miss the company of artists. I miss the sensitive, intelligent conversation, the warmth, the ideas. I'm a very lonely man these days."

His audience made sympathetic noises.

"I am painting again. I will tell you about that in a moment—and I find my flow of ideas is sadly impeded by the stiff thoughtlessness of my provincial relatives."

By the time he had embroidered upon this theme for a further ten minutes it was perfectly clear to both Louie and Annabelle that Alaric was bored to death, restless beyond description and ripe and ready for a proposition.

They refrained from making one. Instead, Mr. Leventhall said softly, "It is a very great pity to me that you ever left the stage, that you ever became so rich that you needed no more money."

"What!" exclaimed Alaric, "need no more money? My dear boy, don't you believe it. My commitments are terrible. I should always be glad to earn more money. Nothing would please me more. Mind, I'm doing pretty well out of my painting and drawing apart from my inheritance" (the word glowed out of his remarks for the two listeners and they stored up the memory of it jealously), "but if it were not for my responsibilities I should like nothing better than to return to the stage."

At this point the landlady came in to clear away. Miss Anise declared that it was time she prepared to go to the theatre—and nothing more was said then.

Alaric had several drinks with Mr. Leventhall before the show opened. He was finally settled in the third row of the stalls a few moments before the curtain went up by a very thoughtful gentleman, whose mind was working very fast indeed.

In the quick brain of the producer-manager an idea was already simmering, an idea which, the more he thought of it, the more it attracted him. All through the performance the idea grew and magnified. It was really upon examination a superb idea. A gem of a one, such as would make a man's fortune indisputably if it could by some means be brought to fruition. It was a very special flash of brilliance designed to suit very

special circumstances, because Mr. Leventhall had already realized that although the time was ripe for many things, Alaric's return to the touring stage was not among them, although he was pretty sure that gentleman was spoiling for an opportunity to feel the boards once more beneath his feet.

After the performance, the three went out to supper. After supper they talked again. Leventhall asked several questions about the town, its environs, its facilities, and its population, while although Alaric's replies were vague and in the main totally unreliable, the picture which his questioner built up was very encouraging towards his precious "idea."

He listened happily to Alaric's suggestion that they take a carriage drive in the morning if the weather were fine . . . until at last the three parted company upon the understanding that the carriage would call first for Annabelle and then for Mr. Leventhall, some time after eleven o'clock on the following morning.

Alaric went home. He ordered a sleepy and resentful Jellaby to reserve the carriage for him in the morning and to tell Mrs. Dingleby that he was not to be disturbed by her at all that day. That she could not have the carriage, nor Mrs. Witherspoon either. Then he went to bed thinking that if things continued to brighten in this manner he would re-engage a coachman and footman for himself and put the greys between the shafts of the Wendover brougham once more.

In the morning he hurried down the stairs in his fawn tweeds and checked ulster, entered the carriage, and was half-way down the drive before Theodora appeared on the steps. He waved to her defiantly as the carriage turned into the roadway. His attitude towards his wife now was of a small boy to his governess. She irritated him, bored him, and represented an obstruction towards his pleasurable casual relationships. He tried, so far as possible, to forget her, except in so far as she stood him in good stead as manager of the household, buffer between himself and the Witherspoons, an elegant ornament to be paraded at respectable social gatherings. He forgot about her before the carriage had gone ten more yards, after which he amused himself until he arrived at Annabelle's lodgings by envisaging the consternation his family would feel if he brought his theatrical friends back to the house for supper after the evening performance. This idea sowed a fresh seed within his mind. A seed which was to bear ghastly fruit.

However, no shade of tragedy hung over him on this clear, bright autumn morning. Miss Anise appeared almost as soon as the carriage drew up. She looked very well, she was smiling, and she wore a very large and most becoming green velvet hat with a plume in it.

"The spirit of the morning," Alaric told her, as they bowled away once more to collect Louie Leventhall. "A picture of blooming girlhood." He patted her fingers with his yellow-gloved hands, examined her impertinently through his monocle, and leaned near to her as the carriage swayed round a corner. "Dangerously alluring," he said toothily.

"Hush, you naughty boy," said Annabelle, which made Alaric squirm with delight.

Louie, in a brown bowler, a rather terrible suit, and very highly patterned ulster, was also in fine spirits. Alaric instructed the coachman to drive to a tavern about three miles away. "Show you the countryside," he said expansively, as if it were his particular property, "stop at the tavern for a drop of light refreshment, and come back in time for lunch at the 'Gorgon'."

Louie Leventhall was fortunate in looking well that morning. His idea had kept him occupied during most of the night. First, he had talked with Annabelle, after Alaric had gone home. Then he had returned to his lodgings. Here he mixed himself a jug of cocoa. He lived sparingly when not concerned with business. He sat with this beverage and one of Alaric's cigars, while the details simmered in his fertile brain and resolved themselves into an orderly whole. Then, and then only, had he gone to bed. Even so he had slept little. Now, as he faced his leading lady and his victim as the carriage sped easily over the roads, his dark eyes glimmered and his hands twitched. He prepared to broach the idea at last.

"You know," he said slowly, "I was thinking a great deal about you last night, Alaric, after you had gone home."

"Me?" Alaric was gratified without being surprised. "What about me, dear boy?"

"About your lack of artistic stimulus."

"Ah!" Alaric tried to sound profound. "Don't speak of it, dear boy."

"But I will speak of it," declared Louie roundly. "I intend to speak of it. It worries me. You don't know the chief reason. You cannot know." He broke off and tapped his forehead significantly. "For many, many months now, ever since my last visit to this town, ever since I surveyed the castle grounds and saw the noble prospects of this place I have said to myself, 'Ah, Louie, if Alaric were not so bound down by his social obligations, what a wonderful thing *he* could make of your idea!' The idea has been locked for all those months within this mind. Destined to remain there because the master mind who could put the plan into operation is placed too high socially to participate."

He looked anxiously at Alaric, as if he were afraid that he had laid on the flattery too thickly, but Alaric appeared most gratified, as well as extremely curious.

"Who said anything about my being bound down by my obligations?" he demanded. "I hope I am my own master. I hope I am not so dominated by the women all around me that I have not a mind of my own."

Mr. Leventhall lifted a silencing hand. "So say no more, my friend. I know it is in vain. I know that much as you would love to share my brain child, much as you are capable of bringing the very highest artistic ability to bear upon the fulfilment, it is impossible. It would not do."

"What would not do?" Alaric was becoming indignant. "Tell me so that I can judge. I would have you know that I make up my own mind. I do as I wish. I am my own master, I should hope." He was becoming

shrill, his voice mounting with each phrase.

At this moment Annabelle intervened. "Dear, dear Alaric," she said, "if you could but see your way to ride roughshod over the conventions of your friends, to take a firm stand like the true artist you are at heart. . . ."

"Will you tell me," he screamed. "Louie I insist you tell me. *What is this idea of yours?* For, by heaven, if I like it I will show you who is master here and now, and will put my hand to it this very day."

Smiling doubtfully, speaking carefully, Louie Leventhall told him, and the carriage drew up before the tavern, and no one alighted, while Louie spoke.

"When I came down here, I discovered that it is permissible to arrange pageants and entertainments of a public nature within the castle grounds. Some old law it is that makes it legal. Something to do with entertainments put on before Queen Elizabeth, and a grant made afterwards in perpetuity. Being naturally attracted to the perfect setting these grounds offered for a theatrical venture, I thought about it all quite frequently in the months which passed. Then I came again and I returned to the site. I viewed that natural theatre. I saw, how with the great Pavilion in the background for performances in bad weather, a venture could be made, an open-air theatre for all the best dramas and tragedies, Shakespeare included, which might last the summer through, at moderate prices, one performance each early evening, and be both glory to its backer and a source of excellent revenue at the same time. Visualize it! No lights, no curtains, simple scenery blended with the natural background. Chairs set on the sward which slopes away naturally from the central grassland which would be the stage, and, of course, I immediately thought how, with you and your name behind us, the county would flock, local authority would give its blessing, and local inhabitants have the chance of seeing their own talented son pouring out his gifts before them, the citizens of the town of his birth. Call it a dream if you like. Call it an idle fancy. I am a plain man of business, as you will know. I see matters as men of business see them. In the lights of the cold, hard cash they can bring in, the publicity they will win, and even my cold business mind is fired by the prospects embodied in this proposition. While my common sense tells me that you will have none of it."

Alaric was leaning forward. His eyes were shining, excitement twitching at his features. "Who says it's just an idle dream?" he shouted, causing the well-trained coachman to shiver with disgust. "Who says I shall not dare to do it? Who dares to say any such thing? Louie, this is a day of great adventure. This is a very wonderful day." Slowly Alaric extended his arms, threw back his head, and began declaiming while the two conspirators watched him, spellbound. "I agree with your inspiration! I approve of your idea! I am whole-heartedly in favour of it! You shall have your pageant! Easterbridge shall have its pageant! We will bring pageantry to this town as it has never dreamed that it should see it . . . here, take my hand upon it."

Eagerly Mr. Leventhall shook the outstretched hand. Annabelle, laughing delightedly, flung her arms around the speaker and kissed him.

"Oh, how happy I am," she exclaimed, "for, dear, dear Alaric, you will let me play with you? I will be your leading lady!"

Alaric possessed himself of her hand. "You *shall* be my leading lady," he promised her. "Together we shall scale the heights of fame and earn ourselves the world's applause . . . what about a drink, Louie. I believe I am thirsty?"

They dismounted from the carriage at last. Alaric never stopped from talking for one moment, and with Louie upon one arm and Annabelle upon the other, they disappeared into the tavern and quenched their thirsts most generously.

* * * * *

It was seven days before Theodora heard of his venture. In the meantime, the company had gone on to their next "date," leaving Mr. Leventhall behind to make preliminary arrangements with Alaric and the local authorities. The excitement of the project and the delicious future it invoked made it possible for Alaric to keep the affair to himself until the excitement wore a little thin, and he needed the fillip of a reposed confidence to restimulate him. Then he told Theodora, who already knew well enough that something was afoot. Alaric's comings and goings were veiled in mystery, the carriage was commandeered at irregular hours. Several men had already arrived from a local stables, with references declaring them to be excellent coachmen and footmen. These persons Alaric interviewed in the library, and finally engaged two unlikely looking applicants, one of whom looked like an ex-jailbird, and persisted in addressing Alaric as "Colonel," which eccentricity gained him the post. On the morning that these two were seen to appear, take out the Wendover brougham, and start cleaning it, Alaric marched into his wife's room and told her what was afoot.

It all confirmed Theodora's worst fears. She saw the remainder of the fortune pouring away upon the venture, and saw, too, that endless other complications would undoubtedly arise as the matter went forward. She sat and listened, while Alaric roamed the room gesticulating, declaiming, and declaring, finally, that if the venture were all that he hoped it would be, he would very probably see himself in the next Honours List as a result of his services to the arts and the town. He built up a picture of a wonderful trade boom as a result of the publicity and the tourists who would pour into the town like a stream of purest gold.

"Who will be your leading lady?" asked Theodora faintly.

"Miss Anise—fine girl—a very fine girl."

"I might have known it," thought his wife, while her fingers itched to be at the pair who had engendered this appalling scheme. "Aren't you looking rather far ahead?" she said aloud.

"Certainly not. There are a thousand things to do. Plays to choose, company to engage, scenery to design and paint—I shall probably do a lot of that myself. We shall rehearse here—hire the Shire Hall banqueting

room, it will do very well—and then, of course, I must build up my contacts, see people, interview the Press."

Theodora was dreadfully torn in her efforts to decide what attitude she should adopt. For a moment she thought of suing for the leads herself, and then realized that if her personal plans were to come to fruition it was imperative that she remain in command at "Laurelston."

At length she decided to express her views and said very firmly, "Well, I'm sure I wish you well, but I cannot view the plan with favour."

"Why not? Are you jealous because I haven't asked you to play the leads?" He was immediately angry.

"No, I am not. I was glad to leave the theatre and grateful to you for making it possible."

"Well, this is a very fine way to thank me, I'm sure!"

"I don't want to discourage you. I'm only speaking for your own good."

"What are you, my wife or a damned school-marm?" he answered.

Wearily she embarked upon her losing battle. "You may find it very costly," she began.

"I can afford it. One can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. If I do spend a bit, I'm bound to get it all back, and more besides."

"Have you any idea what it will cost you?"

He shrugged his shoulders, "Not in so many words. Louie and I are discussing the details this week. Then I shall probably go with him to select the cast and a hundred other things."

Even now she dared not ask, "To London?" Instead, she said, "Well, when do you propose to go into rehearsal?"

"Oh, that's all arranged. Annabelle is going into panto again this year—for six weeks. She will come down here directly afterwards with one or two others of the leads and start work straight away. We don't want to hurry this thing. For the sake of a few extra weeks' expenditure it would be shameful to scamp the work."

Theodora recognized Leventhall's influence in this statement. "But that means you'll be starting rehearsals some time in February?"

"Quite right. We shall open in April. Shakespeare's birthday in the Pavilion. Couldn't choose a better time. We'll go on right through the summer. Then, if all goes well, we'll tour afterwards. There's no end to this thing, no end! I tell you, Theo, I shall become great. It's a pity . . ." here his tone changed and became pathetic . . . "it's a great pity I don't get a little encouragement from my own wife when everyone else is so delighted."

"Naturally," she thought bitterly, "since *everyone* is Louie and Annabelle, who will make a very good thing out of it for themselves, whether it succeeds or not. "What about costumes?" she said heavily, "they'll cost you a fortune?"

"Oh, I shall go to Nathans. They can dress the shows right through. I'll see Mr. Karl; he'll make a capital job of them. Afterwards we can sell the wardrobe without difficulty. There'll be very little money wasted there."

With horror piling upon horror she asked weakly, "Have you any idea what plays you will do?"

"We've decided on one or two. *The Dream, As You Like It,* and two pageants. One round Drake and the Spanish Armada, you know . . . Plymouth Hoe—Drake playing bowls . . . Elizabeth arriving . . . Sir Walter Raleigh . . . (I shall probably play Raleigh) and another about the Battle of Hastings (I shall play Duke William). We'll stage the battle . . . with Harold inside the shield ring and the French archers storming the slope . . . there's a slope ready made in the castle grounds."

"But, Alaric, you'll need an enormous cast!"

"Local talent," he said airily, "a mere nothing. They'll be glad to play for a few shillings a week after their work is done."

"And thousands of costumes."

"I've already told you. Nathans will see to all that. We can hire a great number of them."

Bitter rage got the better of her. "Why don't you do the meeting of Anthony and Cleopatra," she said furiously, "the golden galleon and the slave girls . . . and the banquet?"

Alaric swung round. "I knew you'd come to see reason," he said eagerly. "That's a wonderful idea. I could play Anthony . . . all in gold . . . a gold cloak . . ."

"Oh, my God!" said Theodora.

"And now what's the matter? Don't you think I *could* play Anthony. Let me tell you, Theodora, you have no idea what I can do yet. I can feel the fires of Garrick and Burbage burning in my breast" (so many B's caused him to splutter a little). "Just you think a little less about the cost and a little more about the productions. You're on a good thing there with the Anthony and Cleopatra thing. As a matter of fact, I'm glad I thought of it and you improved on my idea . . . now I must be off. I promised to meet Louie at twelve. I've engaged myself a coachman and footman, so I shall not be taking the carriage when you want it. You see how I think of you! I might consider bringing Louie up for a meal before he goes. I'll let you know. And don't you adopt those puling tones with him. It wouldn't be very nice for me to have them know my wife had no faith in me! Good-bye."

He hurried out of the room and left his wife gazing blankly at her befrilled dressing-table envisaging with dreadful clarity the chaos that was to come.

* * * * *

He was true to his word about Leventhall. He brought him, without warning, to dinner the same evening. He sent word by Jellaby that the two gentlemen waited below. Theodora came out of her mother-in-law's room and received the message.

For a second she stared at the man blankly. Then—"Tell Mrs. Blossom at once, Jellaby. Apologize for the inconvenience; ask her to do the best she can in the short time. Bring up some of the Napoleon and a

magnum of champagne. We'll have some hock with the turbot, marsala with the soup. Kindly let Mrs. Blossom know I will be down in a few moments. Send Victoria to me and inquire of Mrs. Witherspoon if she and Mr. Witherspoon will be coming down to dinner."

She looked back at her drowsing mother-in-law, refilled her glass, concealed the brandy, and then, picking up her skirts, ran down the passage to her own room.

A few moments later Victoria appeared. "Oh, Victoria," she said, taking down the black and pink evening gown from her wardrobe, "we have a guest unexpectedly. Will you be so good as to dress me? Our guest is already in the drawing-room. Her ladyship is unwell this evening, and will want a tray in her room."

Victoria did as she was requested, and in a very short time Theodora was rustling down the back staircase with a plume and a diamond or two in her high-piled hair, the diamond necklace glimmering at her throat. She carried the keys of the store-room and she went rapidly towards the kitchen.

Mrs. Blossom met her at the door.

"Oh, Mrs. Blossom," she said rather breathlessly, "I do hope Mr. Alaric has not inconvenienced you. A matter of business. Rather important."

"Not at all, madam," said Mrs. Blossom, "I just wished to consult you regarding dessert. We received some peaches this morning. There are grapes also. Would you wish for anything else?"

"Ginger," said Theodora, selecting the store-room door-key, "and a box of Karlsbad plums. I will give them to you now. Has sherry been sent into the drawing-room?"

"Jellaby took it up some moments ago, madam."

"Good." She was taking down boxes from the shelf rapidly.

"I took the liberty of asking cook to make a cheese *soufflé*," Mrs. Blossom added, "and there's a nice capon."

"Then we shall do very well." Theodora relocked the door. "Be good enough to send those keys to my room. I will go through the serving door, it will be quicker."

She shook out her skirts, patted her hair, and sailed towards the dining-room, content that she had done all possible in the short time to impress the little theatrical. Jellaby was coming out of the drawing-room. He held the door open for her and she made an excellent entrance, hearing Jellaby's soft murmured, as she went in, "Mr and Mrs. Witherspoon are dining in their sitting-room, madam—dinner will be served in a few moments."

* * * * *

Mr. Leventhall rose, awkwardly, with his sherry glass in his hand.

Alaric presented him, "Mr. Leventhall, my love . . . Louie, my wife."

Theodora extended a white hand haughtily and said in a slightly

patronizing voice, "I have heard much about you from my husband, Mr. Leventhall."

"Oh, call me Louie," said the little man. "Let me congratulate you on the fine place you have here—quite baronial!"

Theodora dispossessed him of her hand and sat down.

"You never told me," he said, turning to Alaric, "that your wife was a beauty."

"Meant to surprise you, old boy," said Alaric, clapping him on the shoulder. "Have another sherry? Theo, have a drink?"

She accepted, and held the glass for an instant. "To your venture," she said smilingly, "may I wish you all the success you deserve."

Alaric looked pleased, Louie darted her a quick, surprised glance as if suspicious of the irony, thought the better of his instinct, and returned the toast with vulgar gallantry, "To your beauty, Mrs. Dingleby."

"Dinner is served, madam," said Jellaby.

Theodora took Mr. Leventhall's arm and they went through into the dining-room. "I must apologize for my mother-in-law's absence," she said. "Lady Dingleby is far from well these days. She rarely leaves her rooms. My sister-in-law is also unwell at present, I regret."

"We're expecting an addition to the family," said Alaric, coarsely.

"Really!" Louie looked up expectantly. "Not . . . er . . ."

"Oh, no. My sister. No, nothing like that with Theo—too careful, I think. . . ."

"And when is the happy event?" Louie Leventhall took a soup spoon and began ladling the soup towards him.

"Some time in May, isn't it, Theo?"

"I believe so. Mr. Leventhall, I am replying on you to tell me all the details of your plans. I am most interested."

"You were on the boards once yourself, weren't you?"

She laughed affectedly. "Oh, nothing very much. Just a part here and there."

"Theo was a good, sound actress," Alaric said. "Some more soup, Jellaby—more soup, Louie? No! I like soup myself. Now, what was I saying? Oh, yes, Theo! If she hadn't hooked me she'd still be playing, wouldn't you, my dear?"

"There's no knowing what might have happened," she replied smoothly, "if I hadn't married you, Allie."

Mr. Leventhall began to feel uncomfortable. There was something about the composed, beautifully-gowned woman, in this lush, overcrowded room that oppressed and vaguely frightened him. There was an undercurrent, a strange vibration, which made him feel he were walking upon poisoned spikes. He shivered.

"Are you cold, Louie? Damned cold in this vault of a room, Jellaby, put some more coal on the fire."

"What would you like me to tell you?" said Leventhall, turning to his hostess. "I am perfectly warm, thank you, Alaric."

"Alaric mentioned something about pageants. Does not the magnitude of the casts necessary for these frighten you?"

"Not at all, not at all," said Alaric, cutting in at once. "Told Theo —perfectly simple—local talent, nothing easier."

Obediently, Mr. Leventhall took his cue and elaborated upon this theme. "I'm particularly fond of the pageant side," he told her. "Something big and fine about the scheme. Imagine great scenes from history under the castle wall in the shadow of the past, as it were. I'm very attracted to the idea of the Anthony and Cleopatra one, too. Alaric tells me you had a hand in touching that idea up."

Theodora began to feel hysterical. "Oh, yes, I did," she assured him, "and it struck me afterwards that you might do something with a play about Robin Hood. The greenwood, you know, all the Merrie Men—Maid Marian—Friar Tuck. . . ."

Alaric laid down his spoon. "I'll play Robin Hood, of course. Why don't we write such a play—Louie, why don't we?" Had Mr. Heatherstead heard this conversation, he would have rechristened Alaric "Bottom."

Having seen her husband's feet securely pointed towards disaster, it seemed as though Theodora was impelled to hurry him onwards by some bitter twist of humour.

"You could start with Friar Tuck coming along a bank to fish. Maid Marian could run out from a wood with a bow and arrow in her hand, and the Merrie Men streaming after her," she suggested. "You could have a property branch overhanging the scene! Then after a few moments, when the company was on, Robin could swing down from the branch and land in their midst—cries of 'Robin! good Robin! Where have you been . . . ?' and so into your play."

This delectable tit-bit, flung between the soup and fish, carried the two men irresistibly forward until the arrival of the cheese *soufflé,* by which time Robin and the Maid (Alaric and Annabelle) were clasped in long, slow embrace, taking good care, of course, that Annabelle did not mask Alaric's alluring profile; then the chorus came on to declare the play ended.

"Capital!" said Louie, rubbing his hands. "Truly capital. We will go into it at once. Will you permit me to make a note?" He drew out a pad from his waistcoat pocket and made a brief entry. Then, as he attacked the *soufflé,* he remarked, "I have a fellow in mind. Very able. Not doing too well. Get him quite cheap. He could come down here while the panto season is on and get the dialogue lined up for the pageants and Robin Hood. Then, when we do go into rehearsal everything will be ready and we can start without delay. He would work with Alaric, of course. He's especially good at dance routines. Plays the piano as well."

He was by this time so mellowed with food and wine and luxury that he would have agreed to the staging of Agincourt—cavalry charges and all. Theodora's seeming compliance and co-operation had driven his uncomfortable suspicions from his mind. He was truly delighted with everything.

"Do I know this feller?" Alaric inquired.

"No, Alaric, unless—let me see—were you on the *Broker's Tryst* tour?"

Alaric shook his head.

"I was," said Theodora suddenly.

"Well, then, you must remember him, my dear. Felix Ansell. . . ."

Theodora thought for a moment. "Felix Ansell? Wasn't he trying to be a poet. Played the Herald and was assistant stage manager?"

"That's the boy—very able. Paints scenery—writes dialogue—should go far."

Theodora remembered a fair-haired youth with a lisp and slender hands, who affected a Regency manner, and smelt of cheap perfume. All she said was, "I remember him, and now, if you will excuse me, I will leave you two to set the seal upon your fortunes."

As she left the room Leventhall experienced another tingle of disagreeable chill, despite the good food and the wine.

Alaric pushed the decanter towards him and he helped himself liberally. This was a very peculiar house!

CHAPTER XVII

It was a strange winter! For Mr. Leventhall it was a very busy time. He dashed about England (at Alaric's expense) feeling more important than he had ever felt before, engaging actors and actresses, having long conferences at Nathans, sending wires to "Laurelston," and, just before Christmas, despatching the frail Felix Ansell by train to Easterbridge with injunctions to "be firm"—and a five-pound note in lieu of expenses.

Alaric went off in the carriage to meet him. He announced this impending arrival to a startled household, demanded that a room be prepared immediately, called for luncheon half an hour earlier than usual, and managed to be excessively insulting to his wife before his departure.

To Theodora, the winter was unending. She was a daily witness to her husband's increasing extravagances. Lady Dingleby, who had degenerated, through brandy drinking, into a querulous child when sober and an imbecilic one when drunk, leaned on her to such an extent that she was fearful of leaving her room at certain stages of the old lady's inebriation, lest, reeling and unsteady, she pursue her down the passage, crying gently.

The scandal was demoralizing to the servants. Mrs. Blossom was for ever poised upon the point of departure, and the lesser servants were becoming recklessly free with their comments upon the household. Everyone knew that Lady Dingleby got drunk with monotonous regularity. No one credited Theodora with having started the habit. Now the forthcoming productions at the Pavilion and in the gardens of the Castle provided the extra tit-bit that projected middle-day dinner-hour into a two-hour session of comment and speculation, while Jellaby lounged, coatless, at the top of the table and encouraged the unlicensed speculations.

He was a bad servant. Mrs. Blossom was a despairing one. Between

them below stairs degenerated rapidly, and Theodora was not strong enough to stop the rot. Amelia did not care. She and her husband, secure in a suite of their own, busy with plans for the forthcoming child and the new butterflying season ahead, were quite indifferent if meals were late, table linen creased, or silver slightly tarnished. The food was always plentiful. The bells were answered when they rung. They asked for no more. When Amelia entertained her few acquaintances, she came down to the main reception room, but apart from these infrequent visits, she and her husband lived an almost entirely separate existence, and, where it was impossible for them to ignore unpleasantness, they played ostrich fairly successfully, and pretended that they could not see.

Alaric had announced to everyone recently that he and his partner proposed to commence their venture with an April and May run at the Pavilion, of Shakespeare, interspersed with a couple of modern comedies, and burgeon out, with the advent of warm weather, into open-air pageantry. Alaric was convinced that he would make another fortune, Leventhall was doing very well out of existing "expenses," and the pair overrode their difficulties with remarkable aplomb.

Alaric went to some pains to contact those local tradespeople, civic dignitaries, and petty gentry whom he thought might prove useful. To them he spouted at length about art for art's sake and the benefits resultant to the town. After a few initial forays he came back from his attacks flushed with triumph and waving a long column of advance publicity which the Easterbridge paper afforded him free of charge.

He was swelled up with his own imagined importance, spending money wildly, his unrelated actions as entirely unpredictable as heretofore. Thus, while Nathans waited for lists of costumes in order that they might first ascertain what might be supplied from stock, Alaric spent a week in his study making a toy theatre with small clay models of the intended principals. Wearying of this game, he made lists for several days, left them unfinished, and scoured the town for the local talent about which he had spoken so airily.

Small children were engaged from the schools. A local seamstress engaged to take their measurements (in December) for clothes which they would require in April, thus ensuring that all would be at least too tight if not altogether too small for them to wear.

The result of his foraging was peculiar. At odd hours, extremely peculiar creatures of both sexes toiled up the drive and rang the bell, keeping Jellaby hard at work and short of temper. In local dialect they asked to see "the gentleman about the play-actin'." Then Alaric enjoyed himself still more, declaiming his ambitions to wide-eyed yokels who deemed him mad, but fell for the promised wages.

He then returned to his lists. He lost them, he tore them up, he threw them away, he made fresh ones. He rang for the servants and abused them for mislaying what he had burned personally. Finally, he dragged his wife into his muddles, and nearly drove her frantic with his contradictions and alterations while she strove to produce order from chaos.

When the lists were finished he announced Felix Ansell's arrival. He

then realized that all the previous work was useless, since, until he and Ansell had decided upon the pageants in detail, it was impossible to predict exactly what costumes would be needed. Leventhall had been right when he said that they could not start soon enough.

Ansell finally arrived in a voluminous cloak and a pair of embroidered gloves. Jellaby threw training to the winds and goggled, took the cloak, and blinked at the floral waistcoat which was disclosed by the removal of the cloak.

"My dear laddie," said Ansell, walking delicately towards the drawing-room, "I declare I am delighted to be here. Quite delighted. I said to Louie, 'My dearest friend, I feel here, in my heart, that Alaric Dingleby is a companion in creative art such as I have ever dreamed of having.' I am so sensitive, you know, so very, very sensitive. It is gall for me to rub shoulders with creatures of a coarser mould." He ran his fingers through his long, blond hair, caressed his hairless chin, and stood beside the fire-place with one hand on his hip.

"Oh, Lord!" thought Theodora, coming in to welcome him, "will there never be an end to the shocks!" He was even worse than she had remembered him to be.

"My dear Mrs. Dingleby! Now, you won't deny me past privileges, will you? Let it be Theo as before. You will? You dear creature! I vow you bloom, you thrive! You blossom out under this too lovely marriage of yours. . . ."

He stroked his hair tenderly and permitted them to lead him into lunch. After the meal, Alaric took him off to his study, sent for a bottle of gin at four-thirty, and they both came down to dinner looking flushed and excited. The Witherspoons took one look at Felix and Alaric and went back to their room hurriedly.

Between them the two hashed up three pageants. There was a great deal of stage directions, a lot of highly coloured dialogue, much use made of white horses, golden galleons and silver chariots. After the first two days, they evolved a plan for work which satisfied them completely and nearly drove the household frantic. There was nothing for it but that Felix must have a piano in order to try out the musical efforts required at certain intervals. Therefore, Alaric purchased a piano. It was lugged into the studio, everything else in the already overcrowded room was edged along a few inches into even greater proximity to its neighbours, and work was commenced in earnest.

The two creators arose at noon, demanded toast, ham and eggs in the studio, and then began smoking cigars which they laid down and forgot, until a smell of burning recalled them to mind. Then they scraped the remains off the furniture and lit up afresh. They refused admittance to the servants and disorder became chaos. They eschewed all regular meals. They slept throughout the afternoon, awoke in the darkness, and partook of another meal on a tray. Cold birds were prime favourites. Armed with wings and legs, they marched about shouting each other down and making grease stains on their clothing. By midnight they got well into their stride, the piano began to belch forth sound, and they nearly

burned the house down about four one morning when trying to make coffee on the fire.

Early in the new year Louie Leventhall paid them a flying visit. Then all three of them had a prolonged and dirty picnic lasting all night while they praised each other and made a great many alterations.

Somehow, matters went forward. Alaric discovered that he had engaged fifty adults and children at a wage of forty pounds a week. Louie produced his list of players, another fifteen, whose total wages were another fifty-four guineas a week. These figures looked so reasonable to Alaric that he immediately agreed to the signing of contracts. Thus, at the end of January, fourteen of Louie's friends and a distant cousin twice removed, found themselves with work guaranteed until the end of August.

Annabelle Anise wrote that she would be arriving on Valentine's Day. This sent Alaric off post-haste to engage rooms for her in the town. His choice fell upon a discreet house with which he was already acquainted. Here he engaged a sitting-room and bedroom, on the ground floor, for his leading lady, with a private side entrance from the street. He paid a deposit, bought and installed two comfortable chairs and a cabinet for liquor, and returned to Felix, who was composing a fairy ballet for the Dream. In order to do this successfully, the blond choreographer found it necessary to dance the sequences for himself.

While Alaric covered sheets of foolscap with his large, spidery handwriting, Felix played and danced. First, he played a phrase upon the piano, then he arose, lifted his arms and gyrated solemnly between the *objets d'art.* Then he scrawled some words in deplorable French in a large black book, labelled Dance Sequences, and returning to the piano began another phrase. Below them, in the drawing-room, Theodora, escaped for a few moments from her unconscious mother-in-law, endeavoured to read, while the chandelier above her head swayed perilously and the ceiling shivered.

She looked up irritably. The ceiling reverberated to a muffled capering. She sighed, laid down her book, and stared into the glowing coals in the hearth. There was a pause while the composer returned to his piano. The sounds of Mendelssohn, badly mauled, floated downwards. Then the rocks and thuds recommenced. Theodora gave up the unequal struggle and went to her room.

"If, however, she regarded her trials as heavy during the weeks of preliminary arrangement, they were as nothing to the difficulties which arose when rehearsals started in earnest.

Alaric required hampers of food then for his company. He evidently considered it unjust to expect them to eat at their own expense. He required calling at an hour in the morning which ensured his leaving the house before ten a.m. This called for such unity of effort among the servants and such subsequent giving of notice, for abuses received, and rescinding of notice, for soothing words poured out by Theodora, that even Bet, the lowest of them all, felt the dim tremors of the cataclysm which shook the entire household.

Moreover, when Alaric returned from rehearsals (at any hour from afternoon to daybreak), he insisted upon an audience to hear his detailed reports as to what he had said to each member of the company, how he had said it, and why, and in addition what he had done with his part or parts during rehearsal, so that Theodora spent her time oscillating between her mother-in-law's bedroom and the hallway—for Alaric developed the habit of coming in on the shout, as it were, leaning on Felix, with one arm draped about his collaborator's slender shoulders. He would roar out, "Theo, where are you? Theo, I want you . . ." and various people would rush from various points (a) to soothe the savage actor, (b) to summon the savage actor's wife. On one of these occasion early in March, when he had absented himself from the house for three days and nights and Felix had answered to his wife for his absence by murmuring something about "working himself to death," he came in like a maniac, with an armful of wigs and beards, and roared for his wife, some food, some liquor and "where the hell is everyone, are they all dead?"

Theodora answered him from the stair head, "Coming, Allie. How are you, my dear?"

Alaric grunted. "Worn out—absolutely worn out. Get me some food, Theo, Felix and I are starving—that damned Jellaby's never here when he's wanted."

Then, with one arm draped over Felix's shoulder, he went through to the dining-room.

With compressed lips, Theodora watched them move across the hall. There was a tautness, a strange watchfulness, an extra awareness and awaiting quality about her expression which was deepening daily now. It was as if she was anticipating some event, other than the daily uproars, for which through patient months she had steeled herself and made inward preparation.

Where in her earlier association with Alaric she had made scenes with him, she now awaited his pleasure. Where she had given in some measure the insults she got, now she took them equably and let them fall unheeded. It was as though Alaric's bombast and egotism and coarse unfeelingness had cowed her. Yet there was never any woman less cowed than Theodora Dingleby. She was equipped in some other inward fashion to combat the worst her husband might do, and yet she still gave the strange impression that she was a sentinel on guard against an inevitable event which would come about in the fullness of time and for which she had elected to wait with impregnable calm. Behind the façade of dignity, half simulated by acting ability, half real, the red glimmer lay in her eyes, and would not be put out.

Jellaby crossed the hall. She gave him some orders. "A tray of food for the gentlemen, Jellaby, in the dining-room. Is there a good fire?"

"I made it up an hour ago, madam." There was a certain insolence behind his measured speech now, as he, too, knew that the household was disintegrating.

"Then ask cook to be as quick at she can. Mr. Dingleby and Mr. Ansell are hungry and very tired."

"Very good, madam."

Theodora stood and watched him disappear behind the green-baize service door. She told herself that the sneer was imagined. That it was ridiculous to assume that because she told a butler that her husband was tired he should find any cause to sneer. Yet, in spite of her attempt to reassure herself, the idea lingered persistently. She wondered if it were possible that the servants knew what she knew. Knew, in fact, where Alaric had spent the last three nights. Because she did know. Beyond doubt. By the simple method of recollection. Men of Alaric's instability only run true on their distortions. Because he had been living with a woman older than himself, to whom he owed a great deal, when he met Theodora La Valle, Theodora Dingleby knew without doubt that, as he left that woman for her, so he would leave her for Annabelle, without the honour of admission or the grace of decent concealment. He was too mentally slovenly to care, too spiritually dishonourable to remember! It was never possible for him to know that what he did was the cheapest, loosest form of insult—the insult of betrayal over the garden wall. This night was the only warning she would receive. After that she had to arm herself.

* * * * *

The first of her women friends called the following afternoon. A woman who had known Augusta in her girlhood: a woman with whom Theodora sat on a sewing committee and whose pew adjoined the Dinglebys in the local church.

She came rustling in at four o'clock, accepted a cup of tea and a wafer of bread and butter. She lifted her veil, sipped the tea, and began without preamble.

"As you know, dear Mrs. Dingleby, we are all most interested in your husband's theatrical venture."

"Thank you," said Theodora.

"As you also know, dear Mrs. Dingleby, we are all only too ready to assist in any small way that is possible, but I do feel, as an old friend of the family, painful as it is to me to perform such a duty . . ."

Theodora set down her teacup and cut with bald discourtesy across the rolling period. "You want to tell me about the liaison between my husband and Annabelle Anise?" she said without emotion.

"Oh!" the lady gasped. She sipped her tea hastily, reached for a handkerchief, dabbed her lips. "Oh, dear me! My dear Mrs. Dingleby, you know?" There was mingled disappointment and horror in her voice. "I never imagined . . ."

"I know," said Theodora, "because I know my husband."

"Do you mean to say . . . oh, my dear Mrs. Dingleby . . ." Her voice dropped several tones and she leaned forward. "It has happened before! And you married only such a short time. Why, Alaric is nothing more than a monster . . . yes, that's what he is . . . a monster."

"I agree," said Theodora.

Her guest discarded horror and looked at her hostess with masked curiosity. There was something unnatural in such calm. Tears . . . now they would have been quite natural and reasonable . . . understandable . . . in fact, expected. Even a small faint might be accepted, but this quiet, composed, "I know, it's not the first time," this surely was not alone unnatural but almost beyond the bounds of decency?

The lady began again into the silence which she at least found unbearably awkward, "My heart bleeds for you, my dear Mrs. Dingleby. I do assure you of my heartfelt sympathy." Then she waited.

"I am most obliged," said Theodora. "Perhaps you will permit me to tell you something?"

"Of course, my dear. You can rely upon me. Lean upon me. Unburden your poor heart."

Instead of accepting this generous invitation, Theodora said, "My husband is bored with me. There is no more to it than that. He was bored with me very soon after our marriage. He became bored very easily. That is why he began this theatrical venture, to ease his boredom. That is why this, this woman has come into his life."

"And do you intend to countenance it?"

Theodora made a small movement with her shoulders. "If I were to leave him," she said, "with my mother-in-law in her present state of health, there is no knowing what might happen. It is possible he might even bring this woman to the house."

"You poor, good, devoted creature." The lady guest writhed with sympathy. "I have never heard anything so tragic in my life. Have you no relative to whom you could turn? No adviser?"

"No one," said Theodora, "and my mother-in-law has honoured me with her devotion and her trust. Moreover, as you are aware, Mrs. Witherspoon is expecting shortly. I hope that I can recognize my duty. It is my duty to stay. Augusta, I need hardly say, knows nothing of this. I do not wish her to know at present. She has her own worries and responsibilities, her dear little girl," here she paused and stared across the room. "Perhaps, had we been blessed with a little one, things might have been different . . . who knows. . . ."

The caller departed at last. She went in a flurry of excited rustlings. She went to spread venom through the town. She took with her the tale of a martyred wife, broken in spirit, doggedly maintaining her position in the face of insult. Dutifully caring for the woman who was dependent upon her good offices, the widow, and the expectant mother. The wives of the tradesmen, their sisters and their female relatives, the wives of the petty gentry, their relatives, one and all united as the story spread throughout the town. None of them, no, not one, should set foot across the Pavilion, should set foot upon the grass of the gardens, and if their menfolk chose to attend, it would be alone, and under the *most* heavy censure from their families.

By the time April came, and the advance booking office was opened, there was a strong faction throughout the town that drew back its skirts from Alaric Dingleby and his blond-headed companion—a strong faction

in the club-rooms and the taverns that stopped talking when Alaric entered . . . not surprisingly, the advance booking went badly.

However, on the morning of the "opening," the house was sold out. Alaric had supplied the local newspaper and their relatives with seats. Some of the town officials, relenting by curiosity out of cupidity, had also consented to attend. Preparations had been made for a speech after the performance to be directed towards the artistry and munificence of the promoter. The company had rehearsed most of the previous night, bullied and cajoled, screamed at and wheedled by the tireless, determined and reasonably competent Leventhall. Felix Ansell had managed to have hysterics twice during the dress rehearsal. The first time Annabelle slapped his face, the second time Louie had taken command and poured a bucket of cold water over him, after which, wrapped in a large blanket, he sat sulking in the wings, refusing to do anything for anyone and mumbling rude comments in an unbroken monotone.

Nevertheless, despite everything, the rehearsal was completed in the end. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had been selected for the first performance. Numerous dazed but obedient infants had pranced about the stage with passable charm and grace. Alaric had declaimed the lines of Oberon with a great many pauses and a number of hand passes towards his Titania—Annabelle. He considered he was marvellous. Louie knew he was good enough for a provincial audience and the rest of the company was passable. The costumes were, according to the prevailing custom, loose tunics, cloaks and gowns, girdled into position with great jewelled belts, so that the appearance of the company was graceful and authentic. Leventhall was pleased, Alaric irritable but sure of himself, and Annabelle hopeful after a fortnight of agonizing uncertainty. Alaric refused to go home after the rehearsal on that last night. Instead, he blandly ordered the carriage to drive him to his leading lady's digs. In the morning, Henry Truslove saw him coming out!

Henry Truslove had made rapid strides in the past year. He had given up his work with Mr. Heatherstead—and that gentleman now had another clerk. Henry Truslove had gone into trade. He had ingratiated himself with the new owners of Dingleby's Emporium, and was now, after rapid promotion (due chiefly to his ability as a tale-bearer and spy), assistant under-manager in the "soft furnishings," with prospects of a dazzling future. He saw Mr. Alaric Dingleby leave the actress's lodgings and go to a nearby parlour for a shave. He immediately went into the parlour after him and told the proprietor what he had seen. The proprietor told his customers, and they told everyone they met. By noon the word was around the town, and all the old animosity was fanned to a new peak of high temperature. Henry Truslove, sacrificing curiosity for good sense, sent back the two tickets he and his wife had intended using, and Henry's manager did likewise. All day in the Emporium little whispers circulated, Only the cheapest seats were uninfluenced by the campaign, and when at length the curtain rose only seven out of the first three rows of sixty seats were filled. The house was less than half full.

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It had been Theodora's intention to attend the first performance. She thought it necessary. Then her female acquaintances had approached her and, with hisses and whispers, had signified their horror at such an idea. Finally, while she still wavered uncertainly, Amelia became ill, the doctors were sent for, and the verdict went out that there might be complications over the birth. At the same time, Lady Dingleby elected to get hold of a bottle of brandy that Theodora genuinely thought she had concealed, so that by two o'clock, on the day of the "opening," Theodora had her hands so full that all question of her appearance at the Pavilion was dismissed without question. She sat in her boudoir, before the ornate little "secretary," trying to find the address of the monthly nurse whom she had already interviewed for her sister-in-law.

At length she unearthed it, rang the bell, and gave the paper to Mabel.

"Will you please send someone down to this address at once, Mabel," she said. "Ask nurse if she will come immediately. You can order the carriage for whoever Mrs. Blossom sends. Mrs. Witherspoon is most unwell and the doctors consider it advisable to have nurse here, at any rate for a while. Perhaps everything will right itself. But it is an anxious time."

Mabel took the address and said she would go herself if Mrs. Blossom permitted. Theodora told her she was a "good girl," and Mabel vanished.

Theodora propped her aching head upon her hands for a moment and stared over the desk-top at the sprays and cherubs on the wallpaper. Then she rose and with a deep sigh went down towards her mother-in-law's room. She opened the door cautiously and peered in. The room was empty! On the small table besides the arm-chair stood an empty brandy bottle. The glass lay broken on the hearthrug. There was no sign of Lady Dingleby. Theodora advanced into the room. "Mother, dear?" she said quietly, "where are you?"

Dimly she heard a noise. She crossed to the other side of the arm-chair. Lady Dingleby was stretched out on the floor, face downwards on the hearthrug. Her thin hair was down, spreading about her shoulders. She was breathing heavily. It was perfectly clear that she was quite drunk. Theodora bent over her. With a little grunt at the exertion she lifted the slight body and began dragging it across the room towards the bed. Then, with a final heave, after supporting the unresisting form in the crook of her left arm, she pulled back the covers with her free hand, and hitched the unconscious woman on to the bed.

The sounds of the two women's breathing filled the room, the muffled, sickly sound of the drunken and unconscious Lady Dingleby, the hurried, palpitating breath of the exhausted Theodora, who bent over the bed and hastily undid her mother-in-law's dress. Then, rolling her over, with her face in the pillows, she began unlacing her corsets. This done, she rolled back the body, drew up the covers and straightened her aching back. At once she turned back to the fire-place. She hid the brandy bottle in a drawer of the dressing-table, made up the dying fire, gathered the pieces of broken glass together and dropped them into the waste-paper basket, drew down the blinds, and left the room. Down at the theatre, as she

knew, Alaric would be roaring like a hungry lion! She went down the passage once again with hasty, pattering feet.

Mr. Witherspoon met her at the door of his suite. "My dear sister," he said, his little eyes bulging with anxiety, "I have been impatiently awaiting your return. Have you discovered the address of the monthly nurse?"

"Yes, Clarence, I have. And I have sent a carriage for her. Later, the coachman will go down to the doctor's for the medicines. Is Amelia abed?" Theodora spoke rather breathlessly.

"Yes," said Mr. Witherspoon, "she is. She wishes to see you. Will you be good enough to come in." He was flustered like a bedraggled rooster, all his plumage drooping. His moustaches looked dismal, his hands were limply waving. His whole posture was one of despondency and fear.

"He," Theodora decided, "would go to pieces the instant any crisis arose!" She elected to see her sister-in-law and then go on downstairs to enlist the good offices of Mrs. Blossom should matters become more serious.

"I will come in now," she said aloud. "Clarence, why do you not go for a short turn in the garden. There may be many anxious hours ahead for all of us. A breath of fresh air will surely revive you."

"Oh, I hardly think so. I fear to leave. Do you think . . . I would not forsake my post."

"Nonsense." Theodora could not restrain the sharpness in her tone. "You will be all the more support to us for feeling refreshed, I do assure you. Now, oblige me by going."

"Well, if you think so. . . . I am sure I do not really feel . . ." He stood in the doorway, bending and turning, flapping those ridiculous hands, his eyebrows jerking up and down as if dominated by strings. Theodora brushed him aside impatiently.

"Now, do as I ask you, Clarence," she insisted. She took him firmly by the shoulders, no hard task since he was at least a head shorter than herself, and she pushed him from the doorway. Then with a last firm, "Now, go along, I implore you," she closed the door in his face.

Amelia was in bed, as he had said. She was propped up by innumerable snowy pillows, encased in stiffly goffered pillow-cases. She wore an unbecoming cap, a bed-jacket of bright red flannel, and the nightdress beneath showed ruffled cuffs at the wrists, and gathered frilling edged with white lace at the throat. Her face was yellow, her mouth drawn.

"Well, Amelia, how do you feel?" Theodora approached the bed.

"The pain has passed," said Amelia in a thin, querulous voice. "Have you sent for the nurse?"

"Yes, and she will be here presently. Now, are you sure that you are comfortable."

"As comfortable as I can hope to be," said Amelia ungraciously. "I tell you, sister-in-law, you have no idea what we women suffer at such a time. You may congratulate yourself that you are childless."

Theodora permitted herself a brief mirthless smile. It appealed to her that this woman, upon the lip of her most perilous adventure, should still have sufficient malice left above pain to drive a last barb home at a

fruitless sister. She said tranquilly enough, "Oh, I think I could endure it as willingly as you are doing for such a reward."

Amelia shifted awkwardly on her pillows. "I am thirsty," she complained. Theodora poured out a drink for her and held the cup.

Amelia took it from her. "Don't turn me into an invalid before my time, Theodora." She took the cup and held it in those thin, veined hands. Then she let out a low cry. Her thin face contracted, the sweat beaded out upon her forehead. Theodora caught the cup, putting out her arm across the bedding instinctively, as the tortured woman caught hold of it, and gripped it with both hands. Presently the pain passed.

"The child is coming?" she gasped, a question lingering in her strained voice.

"I think so," said Theodora. "Hold on to me; nurse will be here presently."

"Nurse is here now," said a fat, comfortable voice behind her. "Good-day, ma'am, good-day . . . what's this I hear? A babby hurrying to be born before its time."

The nurse, cloaked, bonneted, grasping a bulging black leather bag, came bustling in looking calm and cheerful, very self-assured and quite dispelling the small clouds of fear and dread which were creeping down upon the bed.

"Mrs. Witherspoon has just had another pain," said Theodora.

"Deary me, never mind that," said nurse, stripping off her cloak, "we'll have to be a lot worse yet before we shall be better, and who will care about that when we have a babby in our arms?" The question was pure rhetoric. She neither required nor expected an answer. When she had rid herself of her bonnet she opened the bag, took out a starched white cap with long streamers, went over to the mirror and adjusted it, then she took out an apron, smothered herself in its crackling folds, and toddled towards the bed.

"Now, Mrs. Dingleby," she said in the voice of one who is dealing with a child of about four, "if you will just leave us quite alone together until we ring we will soon set everything in order and have ourselves as right as a trivet and twice as comfortable."

Theodora began to suggest that there might be certain things nurse would require.

"Of course we shall require things," came the calm rejoinder, "lots of things—towels, hot water, basins, a bassinet—oh, dear me, yes, there will be no end to the things we shall be requiring before we are very much older, but first we shall have to be alone together for just a little while and then we will ring, and we will ask which maid is to be allotted to us, and if dear Mrs. Dingleby will return to advise and assist us."

While she emitted this flow, nurse thrust her capacious bosom forward and against Theodora, who backed, and backed, and backed again, finally bumped against the door, murmured, "Just as you say, nurse," in a failing voice, and got herself out of the room, smarting a little at the proprietory dismissal.

She went slowly back down the corridor towards the servants' stair-

case, thought better of it, and returned to her own room. She then rang the bell and asked Mabel to tell Mrs. Blossom she would appreciate her presence as soon as possible.

At about this time Alaric was busy at the Pavilion trying on his wings. He flapped them about admiringly in the mirror of his dressing-room, which he had transformed with a number of strange articles purchased from local antique dealers. Then he dressed again in his own clothes, and went out to send himself several congratulatory telegrams, in case the number of genuine arrivals should fall short of what he thought his dignity demanded.

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Theodora invited Mrs. Blossom to sit down.

"I'm very worried," she began.

"Does that mean, ma'am, that Mrs. Witherspoon is come to her time?"

"I'm afraid so," Theodora admitted. "If such is the case, it is *before* her time, by at least a month. I fear we have anxious hours ahead of us."

Mrs. Blossom nodded. "What do the doctors say, ma'am?"

"That it is too soon to be sure. They are returning at four o'clock." Theodora glanced at the little jewelled watch which swung from a small gold chain on her dress. "In half an hour. Now, in the meantime, there are certain arrangements we shall have to make. A room for nurse, and she wants a maid to help her."

"Better be Rose," said Mrs. Blossom at once. "It's not really fitting a young girl should be in and out at such a time, but Rose has had a deal more experience in these matters than you or I, if you'll pardon my saying so. Those as live in two rooms and have large families come to be familiar with the facts of life, as you might say, very early."

"Then will you please give her the necessary orders?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then there is something else," said Theodora. "As you are aware, it is the first night to-night of Mr. Alaric's productions. I assured him I would attend. It is now impossible. Could you depute someone to take a note for me?"

Mrs. Blossom did her mouth up in a button, undid it slowly, and said, "Very well, ma'am. The keerridge is going for the medicines shortly. Will that be time enough?"

Theodora nodded. "Of course. Now, one more thing. You had better cancel dinner as arranged for to-night. I will keep to this floor. Her ladyship is most unwell." Here a dreadfully knowing look sped between the two women, and Theodora let her shoulders lift and drop expressively for an instant. "So it will be necessary for me to keep near at hand for her, and at the same time not be out of touch with nurse."

"Quite so," said Mrs. Blossom, "I will send a tray to you, ma'am, and another to Mr. Witherspoon. They do say downstairs he is nigh on distracted."

Theodora agreed that this might well be the case, and dismissed the housekeeper, saying, "Thank you," very gratefully.

Mrs. Blossom informed the kitchen that "there may be some as don't take on altogether to Mrs. Dingleby, but where this 'ouse would be at a time like this without the likes of her, I'm sure I for one wouldn't like to say."

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The day dragged on wearily. The doctors came and went. They expressed the opinion that the birth was undoubtedly imminent. The astonishing word "twins" fell from their lips, together with a number of measured phrases of reassurance and generally soothing balm. Theodora asked what was to be done. The doctors decided that they would return in two hours' time. Till then, they said, there was nothing to be done. Nurse was in charge. Nurse would ask for what she required. The doctors knew nurse and trusted her implicitly. Mr. Witherspoon appeared so flustered by these remarks that he was quite incoherent and Theodora finally, after excusing herself to the doctors, supported the distracted little man back towards his sitting-room, where at last she left him quartering the carpet as if he were engaged in a macabre "hop-scotch" of his own invention.

Six o'clock came and went. The doctors returned. Once more they departed and said they would come again at nine. Theodora took a tray into nurse, and saw Amelia, lying limply among the pillows with her eyes closed. "We're in for a bad time," whispered nurse with relish, "a very bad time, or I'm a Dutchman."

Theodora then visited Lady Dingleby, who awoke when she lit the gas, said, "Theodora," thickly, as if her mouth were lined with blotting-paper, smiled with beautiful complaisance, and promptly went off to sleep once more.

The doctors returned at nine, and had a conference in the drawing-room, where whisky and sandwiches had been laid ont.

Theodora suddenly remembered Alaric with a sense of shock. She had entirely forgotten about him for so many hours. She wondered vaguely how the performance was going. Then she returned to the immediate present as nurse appeared in the doorway and asked the doctors to step upstairs.

"There is nothing we can do but wait as yet," they said ten minutes later. They pulled down their mouths, looked grave and impassive, and, when Jellaby held open the front door for them and the lights from the waiting carriage glimmered redly in the darkness, they went, leaving behind them their two black bags.

Theodora stood alone in the hall listening to the fading sound of clattering hoofs and jingling harness. She stood with her head bent—oblivious. Jellaby looked at her with question in his eyes. "Is there anything I can do, madam?"

"What?" She looked up. "Oh, no, Jellaby, thank you. You may go."

She listened to his feetfalls, now padding softly away over the thick carpet. Odd, unrelated ends of thought tangled about in her brain. "What time would Alaric return? . . . that woman! what should she do? . . . poor Amelia . . . so sour . . . Clarence looks so ridiculous yet I feel sure he suffers . . . it takes a great person to suffer with dignity . . . dignity . . . Dingleby . . . Lady Dingleby . . . poor, drunken Lady Dingleby . . . what would be the end of Lady Dingleby . . . whom no one wanted. . . ."

She shook herself out of the chaotic reverie, lifted her skirts, and went towards the stair head. On went the tangled theme: "Whom no one wanted . . . for in all that house there was not a soul but Victoria to care what happened to Lady Dingleby, was there? . . . if she should die . . . ah, if she should die!" Thought shied away steeply from this trend. She was not dead, but sleeping. Recovering from her appalling private carousal in the big bed in the big room in a bemused state which held off loneliness and futility for a while. Theodora came to her room walking with feet that lingered in laggardly attendance upon her thoughts. She heard her own voice saying softly into the firelit dark of that stuffy bedroom, "Are you awake, Mother?"

Back from the gloom wavered an uncertain answer. "Oh, dear . . . what's that?"

"It's only Theo, Mother—wait for a moment while I turn up the gas. . . ."

A dim affirmative quavered around her as she put out her hands to the gas-tap.

Her hands quivered over the growing flame like distressed white moths, the light crept upwards and rayed out upon the figure which struggled to sit up. Lady Dingleby was dreadfully dishevelled. Theodora, turning towards her, drew in her breath in sharp surprise as the disintegration of the face and figure impinged upon her consciousness so suddenly. This was an old, old woman! This creature with snarls of wispy grey hair, unfastened clothing, sagging cheeks. This voice was the voice of immeasurable agedness. "What a surprise . . ." quavered the dying voice . . . "fancy . . . darkness . . . wanted to get up . . . oh, dear, I am *so* thirsty."

There's death and decay in this house, Theodora was thinking. She stood in her grey gown, the white laces about her throat pointing the darkness of her hair, framing the paleness of her face, "There's ruin and failure here! There's nothing that's warm in all this house of giant fires and great mantling curtains . . . it's all as cold as the grave of soil. . . ."

"What are you thinking about, Theodora . . . you look so strangely . . . why will you not send me Victoria?"

"Victoria is engaged," Theodora heard her own voice again, separately, watchfully. She was two different people, the one the audience to the other, relentlessly watchful, ruthlessly controlling, and she was, in both her personalities, moving omnisciently towards prescribed sequences of events. "Yes, Victoria is engaged. I must tell you, Mother, Amelia is unwell. I am expecting the doctors presently. That is why you were left alone.

Because Amelia is unwell and we are all busy looking after her. I will go now and see that some tea is brought to you."

"Amelia unwell?" . . . quavered that extinguished voice . . . "probably wind . . . *I don't want tea.*"

"Tea," repeated Theodora firmly, "and some thin bread and butter."

"I would like a little of my medicine."

"When you have had your tea."

"Oh, dear . . . I don't know . . . I do not fancy food. . . ." Then the remark about the medicine seeped into her thoughts . . . "Well, perhaps a morsel!"

"Then if you will promise, I will see if I can spare you Victoria for a few moments. But, first, will you promise me that you will remain there until either she or I return?"

"Oh, yes . . . of course. . . ."

Theodora went in search of Victoria, knowing full well that there was no more brandy in the bedroom.

"I'm ever so sorry, ma'am," Mabel told her, "but Victoria went for some things that nurse required. She did not think that she would be needed."

Theodora nodded, attuned to obstacles, practically anticipating them. "Then perhaps you, Mabel," she wrested a smile on to her tight lips, "perhaps you would take her ladyship a tray of tea and some thin bread and butter?"

Mabel looked obviously doubtful. "You know, ma'am, her ladyship doesn't take kindly to anyone in her room but you and Victoria."

"Oh, yes, of course—do you imagine Victoria will be long?"

"Oh, I don't think so, ma'am."

"Then," she said, "we will do as you suggest and await Victoria's return."

Nine o'clock faded into ten o'clock. Ten became half-past. . . nearly eleven. Victoria had not returned. In the meantime, Theodora, obeying a distracted summons from poor Clarence Witherspoon, went speeding towards his rooms and was preached over and abjured by nurse. "All will be well. I'm sure I'm a lucky nurse . . . now, if you will just set here awhile with this pore gentleman. . . ."

Nurse made her a present of the demented Clarence who clung to her moistly, breathing anxieties, prayers and fearful suppositions. Under this cross-fire, Theodora excusably forgot her neglected mother-in-law. Then Victoria came to her. She still wore her outdoor clothes, and her nose was blue with cold.

"Here is nurse's things, ma'am, if you'll be so good as to take them. I understand from Mabel her ladyship is in need of tea and toast. If you will relieve me of these things I will take off my clothing and attend to her ladyship's needs."

Theodora was grateful. There was something about the gloomy persistence of Clarence that swathed her like a winding-sheet. She felt she must stifle if she did not have a moment's respite.

As Victoria turned away, "Clarence," she said carefully, "will you

permit me to leave you for a few moments? My head aches abominably and if you would just allow me to go to my room and take a cachet I promise I will return at once. . . ."

But she did not return. She went softly past Amelia's door, pausing awhile to listen, hardening her resistance against the sounds that escaped from behind the wood and plaster barrier. She tiptoed past Lady Dingleby's door, knowing now that the long-awaited refreshment was on its way . . . and it was then, at the stair head, that she heard a sound below. It was the sound of a carriage, hoofs upon the drive, once more. It was the doctors—obviously. This thought instantly accepted without question from a mind that was absorbed in little else at this crucial time, she stood half in the shadow and heard, not the sound of the muffled bell echoing in summons for Jellaby, as she had expected, but a key in the lock, and behind this noise the murmur of a voice—two voices, more than two . . . the sounds of Alaric's shouting—Felix's answering affectations . . . and, most intimate and dreadful sound of all, a woman's high-pitched tones.

Then the door swung inwards. They were all there. They crowded into the hall, shaking out wraps, laughing, laughing, in that house. Their fantastic clothing glimmered in parody in that unfriendly hall. For these three—these remarkable, heedless, unbalanced three—still wore the clothing that they had worn upon the stage. The woman, Annabelle Anise, Alaric's leading lady, Alaric's avowed mistress, was attired in the gauze and stars and spangles of Titania; Alaric, his limbs swathed in blue tights, painted wings swinging from his arms, was still Oberon, and, most absurd of all, kilted and wearing a monstrous bright red wig, Felix as Bottom—Felix Ansell, not quite sober.

Alaric was, of course, talking. "Come along in," he said several times, dropping his cloak upon the floor, flinging down his hat. "Come along in—we'll have supper and some wine to drown our sorrows. Damn them all, the lily-livered swine, the mealy-mouthed rotters! We'll make success yet . . . success."

The hall reverberated with the echoes of approval. "S'you and your loves," said Felix unwisely.

Theodora stood in the shadow—watching.

She saw Alaric catch Annabelle's hand and fondle it with obvious possessiveness. She saw him whisper to her and laugh—and she saw the woman laugh till the sound quivered in her white throat. "I shouldn't really have come" . . . these words floated from the lips of the woman in the hall to the watcher on the stairs. "Master of my own house, aren't I? Who'll dare insult you insults me." Alaric struck an attitude at once . . . and, looking upward, saw his wife.

She said nothing. She stood perfectly still. Her stillness was the final goad. Alaric, nervously set back, belligerently upon the defensive, called to that unmoving figure loudly. "Well, Theo, what are you standing there for—spying. What do you mean by staying away from my first night—from my performance. Let me tell you I won't have it."

Maliciously pleased, Felix looked from one to the other. Annabelle

seemed to shrink back against the wall. "I think I will go," she said uncertainly.

"You'll do nothing of the sort. You'll come to supper, same as I said. Theo," he voice canted sharply towards a scream, "Theo, come down and make my guests welcome . . . come down at once. Do you hear what I say—damn you, do you hear?"

Theodora animated on that. "I heard you, Alaric." She began moving down the stairs. "Your entry was ill-timed, I fear. Your sister is upstairs, dangerously ill. That is why I failed to come to the theatre. Amelia is in labour, prematurely. I thought I heard the doctors returning—they are expected any minute. I suggest, if you and your friends agree, that we adjourn to the dining-room. You would not care to be seen," she paused fractionally as she reached this word and the last step, "in those clothes," she finished, coming face to face with them.

They were silent. Alaric said, "Why the hell wasn't I told?"

"You were told, Alaric." Theodora's composure was crushing the three of them. "I sent you a note by hand this afternoon. Perhaps it never reached you. Now shall we go?" She ignored the woman. She just inclined her head in the direction of the dining-room and looked at her husband.

There was a rustle of discomfort among them. The devil who was the watcher in Theodora prompted her. "Perhaps," she suggested equably, "you prefer to introduce your mistress to me first?"

Annabelle emitted a tiny, stifled scream.

"Theodora . . . Theodora, where are you?" On that moment of crisis the ghostly call came spiralling down among them all. It coiled about them and lifted their four faces instantly to the direction from whence it came.

"Good God, Mother!" Alaric's was the cry.

Annabelle Anise shrieked again, a half-released, amputated sound. Her hand went to her mouth. Theodora was the last to turn, to see. Then as she saw at last, her lips went bleakly grey. In some strange fashion the flesh upon her cheeks began to twitch.

"Theodora," came the plaintive voice again, "Theodora, I want my medicine . . . Theodora . . . where are you?"

Theodora's eyes widened. It seemed in that moment that she made a valiant effort to move. As if she tried to go forward up those winding stairs, but as if she were no more than a statue, immovable upon the carpet, lacking the flesh and blood and power to stir from that one place.

The words, "Who is she?" whipped into the instant from Annabelle.

Felix replied, like a somnambulist, "Lady Dingleby." Still no one moved at all.

The frail, half-dressed figure, crowned with the eddying wisps of grey, dangling hair, clung, swaying, to the balustrade.

Then Alaric screamed, "Mother—Mother, for God's sake go back to your room—go back to your room, Mother."

There was something fatal about that united immobility—and the next moment crowned it.

Theodora alone knew how dazed and blurred was the vision of that creature poised so precariously above them. Only she knew how the ravages of brandy had clouded eyes weary already with years of futile tears. She made a tiny gesture. Her voice rang out, "I'm coming, Mother. . . ." But it was all over before she could move. The harsh, shrill voice of her son saying "go back to your room, mother," this had robbed Lady Dingleby of the last vestige of feeble balance. She put a tremulous foot forward, as if she intended remonstrating with the implied reproof, the small foot tangled in the trailing, unfastened draperies. Coiled and ensnared, she strove to right herself, her hand came away from the balustrade, and then she fell. She lurched, wavered, swayed once again away from that friendly, saving support, and toppled with dreadful slowness downwards, pitching upon her neck . . . rolling with dreadful, flat heaviness on the last failing wail of a dim, muffled scream.

She landed at the feet of the woman her son had married. She was dead. The macabre figures remained grouped around her in rigid fear and horror. That was how Jellaby saw them as he came rushing through the green-baize door. That was what Mrs. Blossom saw—and Rose and Mabel—and Prudence and Victoria—that was what nurse saw as she came bustling to the stair head with her demand, "Is that the doctors? Is that the doctors . . .? Mrs. Witherspoon is . . ."

That was what the doctors saw as they came throught the still-open front door. A body limply huddled at the foot of the stairs, a group of unholy creatures in fantastic garb, a huddle of gaping servants, and a stiffly starched figure over them all crying, "Please, gentlemen, will you come at once. . . ."

* * * * *

Amelia died four hours later and the cries of her twins were the only cries of life and hope in all that dreadful household, where each occupant lay hidden behind closed doors facing what each one in some measure or other had surely brought about, if only in their indifference to each one but themselves. Only Theodora had got what she wanted. Only she knew whether the price would be too high!

* * * * *

Not long before the deaths of Lady Dingleby and Amelia Witherspoon, Augusta Foote had moved from the house her late husband bought for her in Derbyshire, and had settled herself, her daughter Geraldine, then aged five, and the various domestics which comprised the staff, in a tall, slender, elegant late Georgian house in Knightsbridge.

It was primarily in order that she might be near to her dearest friend, another widow, that Mrs. Foote made this momentous decision. She and the friend, Prudence Lester, both of similar ages, tastes, and inclinations, found that the long visits which each made to the other's home did not sufficiently compensate for the long periods of separation between. There-

fore, when Prudence wrote to Augusta and told her of this delightful house only two terraces away from herself that had suddenly come upon the market, Augusta decided to put an end to separation and wrest up her country roots.

Within a remarkably short space of time the Derbyshire house was sold. Augusta and Geraldine busied themselves with farewell calls about the neighbourhood, Geraldine spent long, excited afternoons while walking with her governess, making comment and conjecture upon the changes impending, and at last the day came when men in green-baize aprons moved about dismantled rooms and a large van stood before the doors.

Naturally, Augusta advised her nearest relatives of these activities. She wrote to Lady Dingleby, and received an incoherent rather blotted reply which crossed and recrossed itself upon a single sheet of notepaper, to such a degree that at least two-thirds of it was illegible. Augusta gathered that her mother entertained grave doubts as to the advisability of such a change: hoped the house was not damp, trusted the water was pure and that the change of air would not be detrimental to her granddaughter. Apart from these and similar remarks, it was not possible to discover what the lady thought. Amelia wrote also. She devoted the first paragraph to her comments which were of the destructively hopeful genre. She trusted "dear Gussie" knew what she was doing, but such a move was undoubtedly fraught with unnamed dangers. She trusted all would be well . . . but she obviously thought it would prove very ill indeed. Then for four more pages she went on to extol the merits of her husband's nature and commiserate with the sister who had found her the husband, for being a solitary creature herself, Amelia also dealt at length with her condition, what she thought, what the doctors said, and finished by saying . . . "Alaric has become quite unreasonable. He is engaged upon a theatrical venture in these parts which *can only lead to scandal and, I fear, ruin.*" As this comment came from Amelia, Augusta thought very little of it. She sent the letters to dear Prudence who sent them back with the remark that she was glad her dear Gussie had herself to rely upon since her family was so little concerned.

Meanwhile, Augusta went calmly along with her arrangements. She wrote mildly and patiently to "Laurelston," said nothing where she could say nothing kindly. Was fully aware that her attempts to advise and guide her mother were quite futile, and did no more worrying about what was obviously past mending.

Three weeks after she had settled in Knightsbridge, at ten-thirty in the morning, when the governess was descending the staircase with little Geraldine, prior to taking a brisk turn in the park, a telegram arrived:

Come at once. Mother and Amelia passed away last night. Twins doing well, Theodora.

* * * * *

With great presence of mind, Mrs. Foote allowed her small daughter to kiss her, tell her of some small activity, and go out of the front door with the governess. Only when the door had closed behind them did Augusta allow herself to sink into a chair and reread the telegram which she held in fingers which now began to tremble slightly.

Mother and Amelia! Dreadful conjectures began to crowd down upon her. It was impossible that the death of the one should relate to the death of the other. Yet by what agency had they both died at once? And twins . . . As her head cleared her first thought was for Mr. Witherspoon whom she privately described to Prudence as "a ridiculous ass," but for whom, nevertheless, pity now uprose above all else.

She rang the bell. Her bonnet was brought. On foot, fastening her gloves as she descended the steps to the street, Augusta hurried to her friend, and the two ladies made the plans and decisions that had so suddenly become imperative.

Within an hour, Augusta had begun her journey. When Geraldine returned, Mrs. Lester was installed in the house, and after an affectionate word to the child the governess was invited into the morning-room where sufficient was said to make the governess *au fait* with events.

Mrs. Lester then settled down to safeguard her friend's domain until she returned. This could not be, she reasoned, for at least four or five days. Even supposing that theatrical wife of Alaric Dingleby's was sufficiently competent to take over the reins once the double funeral was over.

It was not very surprising then that Mrs. Lester was completely shaken from her usual calm when, after no word for three days from "Laurelston" except a laconic telegram, "Arrived safely, Foote," a carriage pulled up at the door three days later and Mrs. Foote got out.

Prudence forgot to ring the bell. She even forgot herself so far as to move rapidly from the first-floor drawing-room down the staircase, and come into the hallway as the bell rang. The astonished maid-servant came up from the basement in time to see the two ladies embrace. She heard with great interest Mrs. Foote's cry of, "Prudence, how thankful I am that you are here, I am quite overcome." After which, Mrs. Lester said sharply, "Jennie, attend to the luggage; be good enough to ask cook for some tea immediately," and the maid-servant, bubbling with unsatisfied curiosity, saw Mrs. Lester, with her arm around Mrs. Foote, whom she later declared to her fellow-servants, "looked ghastly!' supporting her into the little morning-room.

To the even greater astonishment of Mrs. Lester, no sooner had she closed the door than her friend burst into tears.

"There, there, my love." Mrs. Lester soothed her, meantime taking off her bonnet, removing her mantle, and relieving her of her reticule and gloves. "Cry if you will. It will probably relieve your feelings. And then you shall drink a little tea and go directly to bed."

Augusta dried her tears. "I do not need to go to bed," she said, striving to regain her composure. "I shall be perfectly well in a moment. It was just that . . . just that . . ." Her voice trailed away upon another

sob and her eyes refilled with tears. She put out one hand and caught her friend's sleeve. "Prudence—you have no idea. The story I have to tell you. So terrible. So dreadful beyond telling. My flesh cringes when I remember."

"Then," said Prudence Lester with admirable fortitude, "do not tell me, my love. Now see—here comes Jennie with your tea."

Presently, after two cups of China tea, Mrs. Foote's composure was considerably restored. She wiped her eyes resolutely. Begged her friend to be seated, and when the two ladies faced each other upon either side of the hearth she began her tale.

She told of her arrival. Of Theodora's composure. Of the story that was related to her. She disclosed the cause of Lady Dingleby's death. She disclosed the cause of Amelia's death. She told how she asked for Alaric and was informed that he kept to his room and refused admittance to anyone.

She went on to explain, once Theodora had said that all arrangements had been made for the double funeral, how she permitted Theodora to escort her upstairs and of what followed.

Theodora, it seemed, had been extremely calm, dignified, and so coldly assured that Augusta confessed that it was her private idea that the other woman was numbed with the horror through which she had lived.

"She took me to my room," said Augusta in a low, clear voice. "She asked me if I wished to see poor Clarence Witherspoon, who was prostrate with grief. She told me that the nurse had agreed to stay until a suitable woman was found to take full control of the twins. Finally, she left me, promising to return after supper as I had expressed the wish to see mother and Amelia, but if possible to postpone my meeting with Clarence until the morning. She said *nothing* about anything else." Augusta was very firm about this and made special emphasis upon the word *nothing*.

"When she returned all passed as we had arranged. I saw mamma, and I saw Amelia. I then returned to my room. Theodora told me that the funeral would be in two days. She explained the haste by saying that she thought for all concerned the sooner it was all over the better, in view of local events and comments. I had no course open to me but to agree with her. I tremble to think what must have been said in the past few days about my family in Easterbridge. At all events, I kept to my room until the morning. Mabel brought me my breakfast and she asked me if I would see Mrs. Blossom at her especial wish at the first possible moment."

Here Augusta paused and passed a hand over her head. It was an odd little gesture of exorcism, as if by so doing she hoped to dispel the awful mists of memory which threatened to engulf her. Then she went on again. "I told Mabel that Blossom could come when she wished. I don't suppose I have ever spoken of her very much to you, Prue, but she is an excellent woman. Reliable, respectable, entirely trustworthy. She bore with papa most patiently in his lifetime. She bore with Alaric wonderfully well. She ran the house, managed the servants, and kept matters private that she knew we would not wish to have made public.

"She arrived soon after Mabel had gone. I thought she looked dreadful.

I greeted her and asked her to sit down. I made some remark about the terrible tragedy and the strain that we were all enduring. She refused to sit down. She said, 'Thank you, madam, but I prefer to stand. What I have to say is so terrible I wish to have done with it, give in my notice, and leave this room, and afterwards this house as soon as possible.' Naturally," explained Augusta, "I began to say such things as how sorry I was that after all the years of dutiful service she had given us she had to suffer for an event of this kind, and similar remarks, and she quietly put me down.

" 'Madam,' she said, 'you do not know what you are saying. It is my painful duty to tell you of things that have happened and are happening in this house of which you know nothing whatsoever.'

"Her manner was so strange and terrible that I was at a loss to know what reply to make. I became most alarmed, so I said nothing. Presently Blossom continued. 'Mrs. Dingleby left this house about two hours ago, madam. She took all her luggage with her in two hired carriages. She must have been up all night packing, for there were bags and packages in the hall this morning and only the heavy luggage remained in her room to be brought down. She rang the bell and Mabel answered. Jellaby was not rightly ready to go on duty. She ordered Jellaby and the coachman to go to her rooms instantly and she stood in the doorway of her boudoir while everything was carried down. Then she came down herself. She gave me the keys of the store-rooms and the key of the silver cupboard and the wine cellar. She said "Good-bye, Mrs. Blossom, you may perhaps know why I am leaving," and before I could reply she was gone.' "

Augusta Foote paused once more, and said parenthetically, "I did not know why she had gone, Prue. I could not imagine what cause there could be that would permit her to leave in such a manner and at such a moment. Presently Mrs. Blossom told me. It seems that some time ago Alaric became involved in a theatrical venture with a man he had once known when he was on the stage. As far as I could understand, this creature came to Easterbridge with a woman, and they and Alaric met once more. At any rate, the upshot, as poor Amelia wrote to me, and, if you remember, I ignored, was that Alaric began pouring money wildly into a proposition for entertainment in the Castle grounds and Pavilion this summer. It seems he thought to make another fortune. Instead of which he has lost the only one he was ever likely to have. The first of these performances was three nights ago. In the meantime, Alaric had improper relations with the actress who was playing the largest parts with him. Persons in the town came to know of this and the venture was blackballed by a number of our acquaintances. On the night mamma broke her neck, Alaric returned to the house after the performance with this woman and some man who was staying in the house who had something to do with the productions. Theodora must have ordered the woman out of the house—this part is not very clear—because it seems as though Jellaby must have been eavesdropping to know anything about it at all and Blossom is loath to disclose his fault too greatly. What I know did happen was that at the moment when mamma appeared at the top of the stairs,

Alaric and his syren and the other man were engaged in some dispute with Theodora. Mamma became upset and fell . . . she was dead when they picked her up.

"Theodora, Blossom told me, left the house because at this moment this woman was still in the house—in Alaric's rooms—with his mother and sister lying dead in there!

"I don't think I have ever in my most most dire nightmares conceived such a dreadful situation. The servants knew of it! I now knew of it! Should I make any attempt to dislodge the creature there must inevitably be a scene. A scene in that house at such a time was the last dreadful insult to the dead that I shrank from bestowing. At length, torn with anxiety, I did what I thought was wise. I ordered the carriage, slipped out quietly, and visited Mr. Proberty. Prudence, he knew all! More—he knew what I did not know. That out of Alaric's share of papa's bequests there was precious little left. He had settled ten thousand pounds upon the creature. He had lost ten thousand pounds at a single game of chance in London. He had spent ten thousand and more on frippery, and the commitments which he had bound himself to in regard to the production were endless. There would be little or nothing left by the time that Mr. Proberty had compounded with the man with whom Alaric had begun this lunacy. Mr. Proberty told me that Mr. Leventhall (that was the other man) would take over the responsibility of the venture and seek to regain some of the lost money if Alaric would continue in the background meeting wages and other commitments—which in any event he must do since he was bound by contracts. Alaric could not, of course, appear —even he knew that and he was nursing his wrath and frustration in the rooms where he had locked himself. Then I addressed a further query to Mr. Proberty. I said, quite reasonably, 'Possibly part of mamma's legacy may restore his fortunes,' and he looked at me and said, 'My dear, Mrs. Foote, permit me to inform you, Mr. Alaric has no mention in her late ladyship's will, except that he receives her interest in the The Rock houses and ownership in "Laurelston," otherwise Mrs. Dingleby is the sole legatee. . . .'"

END OF PART ONE

PART TWO

THY HARVEST

CHAPTER I

THE passing of the years wrought changes in Easterbridge as it wrought changes elsewhere. Men died and men were born. Fortunes fluctuated. New buildings arose and old buildings were torn down. Young faces became mature, mature faces began to shrink with age, and the aged slipped away and were forgotten. With the passing of the great Queen and the ascension to the throne of King Edward and his Consort the outer ripples and resultant changes shook themselves out upon such suburban fringes as Easterbridge. With the passing of this King and the crowning of George the Good, more changes still were pressed upon that little market town. But even so the pattern was only reasonably shifting; only rationally adjusting itself to new ideas, new governments, new modes and manners of living. There were none of those cataclysms that entirely uproot and remould the face of a nation's future . . . until a murder was done in distant Sarajevo . . . and the world went mad.

Before this happened, when under that lush August heat, all England breathed in still unshattered calm, a girl of fifteen was playing tennis in the garden of a country house a mile and a half out of Easterbridge town. Her name was Geraldine Foote.

Her hostess, Mrs. Prudence Lester, "Auntie" to her adopted niece, sat in a deck-chair a few feet from the edge of the court, with a preposterous gardening hat upon her grey head, and some neglected needlework in her ample lap. Augusta Foote was not there to watch her daughter. She had been dead for close on three years. When she died, leaving the guardianship of her only child to Prudence Lester, that staunch woman had already inherited Grafton Place in the village of Lesser Mellbury, three miles from Easterbridge Town. To this pleasant, irregular house she moved presently, taking with her the young Geraldine and Miss Pledge, the governess.

Prudence Lester watched the game that was still in progress with absentminded complacence. Her thoughts drifted idly from approval of her niece's graceful performance and the charm of her fresh, white dress, shoes, and stockings against the green of her surroundings to a similar approval of the young man who partnered her. Mrs. Lester watched him lift his arm to serve. Saw the ball coil upwards, saw the crisp impact as the down-driven racquet centred it, and the way the youth upon the opposite court returned it.

Mrs. Lester's mind pottered about. The sight of the server reminded her of his guardian. The parallel between the two young people's situations sent her off upon a rambling speculation as to the possible outcome of their friendship. Peter Heatherstead, nephew of Charles Heatherstead,

author, of Easterbridge, was twenty-one, at Cambridge, aspiring to be a journalist—and a firm friend of young Geraldine.

Mrs. Lester sat and arranged a wedding with complete mental satisfaction, while the objects of her innocent scheming finished their game, threw down their racquets and came towards her.

"We've been beaten again, Auntie," said Geraldine. The fair hair, clubbed at the nape of her slim neck with a ribbon, was coiling in small damp curls against her flushed face. "Henry and Stella are too good for us," she added.

"You are not bad for a schoolgirl," said Peter, "not at all bad. In another few years you should be really good." There was the comfortable mockery of an elder brother in his voice. "The only trouble with you is that you try too hard."

"That's always Gerry's trouble." Stella Prestwick, the vicar's daughter, sat herself down beside her hostess. "Gerry feels everything far too much. She takes life much too seriously."

Peter Heatherstead looked down at her. At her placid, plump face and fair head. "No one could accuse you of a similar attitude," he laughed.

"Certainly not. I don't intend to suffer. It's most uncomfortable to go into transports of joy or grief about things. I like to drift along peacefully."

Geraldine spoke. "You miss a lot, Stella. It's terrible to feel so miserable you could die, but it's wonderful to feel so glad you could burst."

"Geraldine!" Mrs. Lester's voice was faintly shocked. "Not burst, my love. It is not pretty."

"Oh, pretty, Aunt! Perhaps not. But it says what I mean."

"And you," said Peter, pulling up small tufts of grass around where he lay relaxed, "will always say what you mean?" There was questioning in his voice.

"I hope so," she took him literally, "I do hope so Peter. If I think a person is bad, I shall tell them so. If I admire them, I shall tell them that, too."

"Then," said Mrs. Lester with awful calm, "I may as well remove myself before the pending shock kills me. It will be perfectly impossible to go through life, Geraldine, saying what is in your mind!"

Geraldine's grey eyes were brooding. "If I thought that I should want to die," she said intensely.

"No one," said Stella, "could possibly want to die on an afternoon like this. Look, there comes tea!" She pointed with a plump arm across the grass to where an elderly manservant and a maid were walking towards them with heavily laden trays.

"My prophetic soul, my uncle!" exclaimed Peter. "Look, Mrs. Lester."

"I invited your uncle," he was told. "It is necessary that I should have someone of mature years to support me when I endure the philosophies of the young on a hot afternoon."

"Are we so dreadful, darling?" Geraldine frowned again.

"No," Peter answered her, "but we must be a bit of a shock to our elders even if we are quite acceptable to ourselves."

"Am I quite acceptable to you?" There was no mistaking the urgency in her voice.

"Not bad—but your tennis will have to improve."

Stella cut across the dialogue. "Don't be so cruel, Peter. Can't you see she suffers when you say things like that?"

Geraldine was looking at the grass, her eyes weighted with sudden tears. This no one but Stella saw.

It was then that Peter overstepped the bounds of teasing. It was then that he said, as his uncle came up to them and the servants set down the portable table and the trays.

"All things considered, she isn't too bad. S'matter of fact, with such an uncle as she has I think, taken by and large, she's pretty good."

Mr. Heatherstead heard him. Mrs. Lester heard him. The servants heard him. The servants went on laying tea. The elderly figure in the holland suit removed his Panama hat and, murmuring a greeting to his hostess, exchanged an intimate glance with her of unspoken question and answer.

Mr. Heatherstead spoke. "Trouble with you, my boy, is that you invent things to make your conversation interesting. I am *not* Geraldine's uncle—unfortunately. Only by adoption. Moreover, to refer to me in such derogatory tones is past forbearance. Move along on the grass, sir, and give me leave to sit by my quondam niece and assure her that I am not so dreadful after all."

While this speech was being delivered Geraldine looked from one to the other with a swift, puzzled expression on her face. "Did he mean you?" she said slowly, "I thought . . . it sounded . . ."

"Whom else could he mean?" said the old gentleman, who disliked a lie above all else in life. "Whom else could he mean? Prudence, I am excessively thirsty. I trust you will soon give me some tea."

He made the conversation general. He chased the shadow from the face of the young girl. He chattered away, and it was not until after tea had been cleared away that his lined face fell back into what seemed, to-day, a more natural expression of gravity. "I have unpleasant news," he told them.

Prudence Lester made a small sound. "It is not possible," she said quickly. "It is not possible, Charles."

"I am afraid it is, my dear. The world has lost its reason I think that we have all gone mad. But we are least honourable in our intentions . . . there is nothing else, so far as I can see, that we can do."

Stella Prestwick was the one who spoke. "You mean, Mr. Heatherstead, that you think there is going to be war?"

"Yes, my dear, I think there is going to be war."

The group was silent. Around them the deep heavy stillness of the summer afternoon enfolded them. The sharp line of shadows beneath the trees and the distant hedge were stirred by the little intermittent sound of the broom pods bursting in the heat. The flaunting wall of brilliant sweet peas which flanked the approaches to the kitchen garden was like a banner of the garden's chivalry, unrolled against the green. There was

such a measure of calm security, such a measure of unchanging peace about them all that the words which had been spoken seemed without real significance—the words of a dream, or an unwelcome narrative.

"I shall be a nurse," said Geraldine suddenly.

Mrs. Lester lifted her head, "You will continue with your studies," she said, her voice almost harsh. "You are still a child, Geraldine."

"Auntie!"

"There, my dear, I did not mean to sound harsh. When you *are* older, you will thank me. Life is a sad struggle, enough and more, without going out to meet it before your time is come. You will help your country most by doing as you are bid."

Again no one spoke for a few moments. It was as though each of them, within the confines of their separate entities, were struggling to adjust themselves to the impossible, to accept the preposterous, and to envisage what was as yet most mercifully beyond their horizon.

"If it is war," said Peter suddenly. He did not finish. Mr. Heatherstead looked at him. The boy met his look. Then the old man put out his hand and touched the young man upon the shoulder. "I shall not stand in your way," he told him.

"Thank you, sir."

"You mean . . .?" Geraldine scrambled to her feet. "You mean that you will enlist, Peter?"

"Of course."

The fourth youngster, the silent George Prestwick, spoke at last, "I s-s-s-s-hall t-t-too," he stammered, "of c-c-course."

"And we shall sit in the schoolroom with our silly books," wailed Stella, shaken from her natural calm for a moment.

"At least, Peter, I trust you will do me the favour of applying for a commission," Mr. Heatherstead said. "I do not insist, of course . . . but it seems reasonable."

"But it will take so long!"

"Not so very long, my boy. I will vouch for that."

"Then if you wish, sir . . ."

Presently the group disintegrated. The servants took away the tea things. The young foursome wandered off to change. Mr. Heatherstead and Mrs. Lester were left alone together as the shadows began to lengthen upon the lawn.

* * * * *

Mr. Heatherstead wore the uncomfortable expression of a man who is feeling intensely guilty about a small fault, for which, if he chose to compromise with himself, he could find ample extenuation. His face revealed by its expression that his mind refused any such compromise, and that in fact he was excessively ill at ease with himself. He said haltingly, "Pity about that, Prudence—a great pity. Cannot justify myself, yet I do feel a small white lie is better than disclosure at this time to so sensitive a child as Geraldine." He fidgeted with his feet and hung like a drowning man on to the lapels of his holland jacket.

Prudence Lester said nothing.

Mr. Heatherstead went on. "I don't like lies. Never know where one is with a liar. And she will remember, y'know. One of these days . . ."

"Ah," Prudence broke in thoughtfully, "one of these days, Charles, it will be incumbent upon me to mention Alaric. The child cannot reside within three miles of her uncle without becoming aware at some time or another that he *is* her uncle. Life never lets one off from difficulties as easily as that. The problem is, *what will Geraldine make of such a story?*"

"It's my belief," he mused, "that she will take it hard. A girl like Geraldine might do anything. Born to be hurt, that girl is. Extra vulnerable. Life will never allow her to get away with anything. Or, to be more accurate, she will never allow herself to escape from anything. She is inexorable in her demands for punishment. Martyr stuff. Sort of female who refuses the fruits of life because the platter upon which they are offered is cast in a slightly faulty mould."

Prudence Lester went to the point. "Would you have me tell her now, Charles?"

"What?" He bounced in his chair. "In no circumstances. Why d'you think I made such a fool of myself just now? Geraldine's got more than enough to cope with, under the stress of her particular temperament, without the added complexity of an unfortunate strain in her family being revealed to her. Y'see, if you look at that terrible story dispassionately, you are faced with one clear fact. That, excepting Augusta, who threw away from the line, all the Dinglebys are unpleasant. Josiah was a cut-throat. Evalina was a fool. Alaric a madman, and Amelia a waspish and unlovely cat. Gussie, who married early, escaped from the taints and was a good woman. Geraldine is her child and Reggie's. He was no great guns, but he was a nice feller. Geraldine's got every chance. Provided you add in her environment (which I believe with Dr. Barnardo is the greatest lifebelt of regeneration), she should come out on top. But there is always the slender chance that sufficient of Alaric and the rest might linger in her subconscious mind to destroy her *if* the balance we have so far achieved is rudely jolted while she is going through the painful stages of adolescence."

Prudence smiled at him. "You know, Charles, I have never known you to make so long a speech in all the years I have known you."

"There's no subject upon which I feel more strongly," he said gruffly. "From the time when you first stumbled up against me in the street, when your pursued your ball and your Abigail pursued you, I have been haunted by this very problem—in another form."

"In what form?"

"The working classes," he said heavily. "How much do you know about the Dinglebys' houses?"

"Very little. I know they owned a lot of property in Easterbridge. I knew Lady Dingleby left her share to Alaric, and for some unaccountable reason poor Clarence Witherspoon made his over to Alaric when he left 'Laurelston' with the twins."

"Then you know as much as is necessary for my story. As you have

pointed out, the whole chain of small houses, two hundred in all, passed into Alaric Dingleby's control when his mother and sister died and his wife left him. Now, it so happens that my pater left me a bit of property in the town. Half a dozen houses are, in fact, in the middle of the Dingleby property. The Rock the street's called. You may know it."

"That dreadful slum!"

"That dreadful slum," he echoed her words grimly. "And that dreadful slum has become more and more dreadful as the years have gone by. But while it has disintegrated, so have the occupants—morally. Poor old Proberty and I have striven for years to get control. I couldn't afford to. Neither could he. But at the risk of taking from Peter what little he has to inherit from me when I pass on, I would willingly have bought up that property from Alaric Dingleby, either to restore or pull down, if he would have sold to me at any time. *But he never would sell.* Proberty maintains its sheer malicious pleasure that has made him refuse all our offers. The battle's gone on for years, and neither Proberty nor I have ever won a single round. Now these houses are going to be condemned, but even if they are condemned, with a war about to break out upon us, *nothing will be done until the war is over.* Moreover, if I am any judge, after the war *is* over, and *if* we win it, it will be more years while post-war readjustments are getting under way before any active steps will be taken anywhere in such a matter."

"And in the meantime," said Prudence softly, "human beings live in filth and squalor, and babies are born and reared in hovels not fit for pigs."

"Precisely."

"Is there any marked contrast in the way of life between the occupants of your houses and the occupants of the Dinglebys?"

The old man smiled. A peculiarly proud smile. "There is," he said, "a very marked difference. I'll give you a case in point. I have a family of tenants in one house, family of the name of Soames. Father, mother, and seven children living in two bedrooms, a small living-room and kitchen. But the rooms are clean. Minnie Soames sees to it that they are. Always has done. And I keep the place in a reasonable state of repair. Now, I don't say that their living conditions are ideal, but I do say that the roof doesn't leak, the woodwork is sound, and the plaster doesn't fall off the walls. But Minnie and Bert Soames were taught right from the beginning. Bert came of country stock. His father was under-gardener at Welling Hall. Minnie's mother was a washerwoman in South End. My father employed her. We owned their house and it, too, was habitable. Now that pair married when Bert was twenty and Minnie was eighteen. Bert was earning seventeen shillings a week in a tannery. They had six children, by which time Bert was earning twenty shillings a week. Then came the Boer War. Bert went, and when he came back Minnie had borne her seventh child and Bert's job was gone."

The shadows lengthened and spread over the green lawns, the rooks in the distant elms forgathered for a conference, the sun faded, and Charles Heatherstead told Prudence Lester the story of the Soameses'

struggle. "From the time I put them to market gardening they never looked back," he said. "A certain amount of malnutrition, about which I knew nothing, undermined Bert's constitution and he died a few weeks ago. Meantime, the children grew up. Young Charlie, the eldest, the one who held the horses' heads, did the grocery round, blew the church organ, and sold manure when he was eleven, is now twenty-five and has the green-grocer's shop in the town."

"I know that well enough," said Prudence softly. "He and his wife run the shop and she's been away recently because she's been having a baby!"

"That's right—and now I suppose . . ." Mr. Heatherstead came back out of the past and faced the future heavily, "Charlie will do exactly as his father did, and he'll be in uniform before we know it. Then his wife will run the shop and hold on as best she can until he comes back . . . if he comes back. I shall go and see them in the morning," he added. "See if there is anything I can do."

Prudence folded her needlework. "Charles, we must go in. But first tell me—what of the Dinglebys' houses?"

Charles Heatherstead looked at her. "Prudence, go and see for yourself. Take a look at the Dingleby legacy; it does not harm. *You* don't soil by contacts, and you might see a way that I cannot to help those wretched people."

"Do you know," said Prudence as she rose and gathered up her things, "I think I will. In the meantime, if this war does come about, will you advise me as to what it is wisest for me to do for Geraldine and myself?"

They went in together across the darkened lawn, to where Geraldine and her friends were gathered around the piano in the cool drawing-room. Presently the lights went up in the big house, and their radiant pathways spangled the darkness, spreading out beyond the grass towards the sentinel trees.

The next day was August the 4th and England declared war upon Germany.

* * * * *

The declaration of war brought a light to the eyes of May Burrage. War meant "soldiers"—an increase of the delightful brotherhood of men which were symbolized to May in her "gentleman friend" from the nearby barracks. She sat in the filth of her living-room, with her knees apart and her tattered skirt drawn up, rocking backwards and forwards over the fireless grate, with her hands over her swollen belly. May was once more pregnant. Presently the father of her two first would come in and hang up his railwayman's cap upon a nail behind the door. Then, if he could make himself heard over the noise of the two squalling babies, Tom, aged one and a half, and Rosie, aged three, he would inquire hoarsely, "Wot's for supper, May?" and his daughter would look at him with animal resentment before replying.

May was "going on for twenty." When she was sixteen she had known that she was pregnant. She had also known who was the father.

It had been a short step from sleeping on a broken truckle bed in the corner of her widowed father's bedroom to being the mother of a child by him. Like animals they lived, and unlike animals, in that there was no selectivity among them, the Burrages interbred without restraint.

May's resentment of her father was not for the dreadful claim he had imposed upon her. It was not for the fact that she disliked him. It was because he was not exciting. Not that she would have been capable of crystallizing her reactions in such terms, but because through her flesh her shrivelled spirit vibrated to a primitive translation of such a fact.

May had always lived in her father's house. To be more accurate—in the Dinglebys' house—and as she passed from the untended childhood, which was composed of household drudgery, squalling infants, and insufficient food, to the swelling womanhood of pleasant curves and roundnesses, she had come to accept, without any attempt at questioning, the filthy environs in which she had matured. Through the years, while Billy and Stan grew up, and baby Dot, the five creatures had struggled for existence. Through the years, the plaster had chipped off the walls until it was down to the bare slats in places. The cobbled stones on the kitchen floor had worn down into a strange hollow in the centre of the tiny room where the rain and the slush ran in and collected. The fire had smoked out into the little living-room and blackened the ceiling and upstairs the two bedrooms had let in the rain and snow. Now, with this soldier's child already stirring in her womb, May sat over the grate and thought about her brothers. They were out. Already at the local recruiting office. Presently they would be gone. "Dot can go in the truckle bed in dad's room," May was thinking. "I'll 'ave a room to meself with the kids."

She looked out of the small window and saw that the sun was already casting a shadow upon the far side of the street. She drew down her skirt, took up a jug from the floor, and went to the back door. Dot was out, scrubbing at the hospital. A job she had obtained two weeks ago and would probably retain for a further two weeks if she were not watched too closely. Dad was along at the railway. May's own two babies toddled in the dirty yard. "You two stay where you are," she screamed, leaning round the open door, "I'll be back presently." Then she went off up the street to get some beer.

She was watched. As she moved past the windows of the houses in The Rock, curtains vibrated as she went by. May knew it. May knew what was going on. She had always known. Since her two children had arrived it had grown worse. Old Mrs. Sedge took a grim pleasure in recounting what some of the unequipped neighbours said about someone who was little worse than they themselves. May tossed her head at them. Not really disturbed. Nothing disturbed her. She was altogether too bovine, too inured to the muck in which she moved. She never would be disturbed. Presently she would grow fat. It was inevitable. For the moment, even with the child heavy in her, she was reeking a certain unkempt, fleshly allure. Her strong, thick calves, showing beneath her dirty petticoat; her splendid bosom, barely concealed by the torn shawl

she pinned across; her dark, uncombed head of thickly curling hair, and her rich, high colouring; these things were of her sisterhood—the assets she required to supply the cravings of her lusty flesh, cravings she neither comprehended nor considered. They *were.* All life was such to May. Unquestioningly. Dad was, and all that he embodied. A nuisance, but as much inescapable as the mud puddle on the kitchen floor. Her hungers were—there was nothing more to May by primary reason of her environment in her sexual than in her gastric cravings. They were indivisible, for no one had ever separated them for her, nor inculcated the least principles of cause and effect.

She went down the street flaunting herself, and her cheeks, and her breasts. She drew her beer and she came back and gave some of it to the babies. After which she wiped over their faces with a filthy flannel and dropped them over the rim of a stinking cot behind the door of dad's room. Then she took out a loaf, some dripping, and a jar of onions. Presently dad would come in.

But he did not. The "boys" came in, Billy and Stan, one tall and thin, the other short and sturdy; their close eyes alight with something akin to pleasure; their shambling movements somehow galvanized into unusual eagerness. They came in awkwardly. They edged round the table, drew out the two stools that lay on their sides underneath, and sat down.

"'Ave you got in?" May asked.

"Yes," said Billy, "we 'ave. Out of this stinkin' 'ole."

"Glad to see the back of you." May turned up her skirts again, over her broad knees.

"'Ark at Pregnant Annie," said Billy, hacking at the loaf. "'Oo's movin' in, May?"

"You shut your bleedin' trap."

When anger rippled her deep calm she curled back her full loose mouth as if she meant to snarl. But the lips relaxed again. She was unattracted by the effort of sustained anger.

"Dad'll create!" she told them.

"Let' im. 'Oo'd want to stay in this dirty 'ole. . . ?" Stan said this without rancour, spreading dripping, spearing onions with the knife he had used for the bread.

"Well, w'en are yer goin'?"

"Soon enough. I'll let yer know, won't we, Bill?"

The two youths guffawed.

May put some sticks between the bars of the grate and began kindling a fire.

"It's 'ot enough in 'ere without a fire," protested Stan. His face was beaded with pallid sweat.

"I want some 'ot water," said May, going on unhurried with her preparations.

"Goin' out?"

"Wot's that to you?"

Between them, this passed for conversation. Presently Dad Burrage did come in. He hung his railwayman's cap upon a nail and twitched out

the third remaining stool. He was a small man, overbent in the shoulders, with drooping whiskers, furtive eyes, and gaunt, simian hands. He looked at no one. He hacked off a wedge from the mutilated loaf, smeared it with fat, began munching regularly. He kept his eyes lowered. Presently he began reading down the page of newspaper on which his food lay. His long, knotted forefinger moved across the printed words.

Upstairs, the children were crying on a thin, protesting note, without expectation of attention.

Then Dot came in. She was May again, but younger, and her hair was light brown. The hips were the same, fully rounded, generously plentiful, and the bright, flat, sensuous eyes.

"Willy O'Twigh 'as died at the 'orspital," she said, standing in the doorway, relishing her news. "Con-sumption, they said it was."

"Ar," said Mr. Burrage, "lungs mebbe?"

"Lungs is consumption, Dad." She looked over the table critically. "Bread and drippin'," she said scornfully. "I'm goin' out with my feller—likely 'ee'll give me fish and chips at the shop. I don't want no bread and drippin'."

Dad Burrage looked up rancorously. "Ef it's good enough for me it's good enough for you, girl."

Dot tossed her head. "God, it's 'ot in 'ere! Pity that window don't open. In the 'orspital they 'as big windows—allus open they are."

"And Willy goes in there and dies of con-sumption," guffawed Bill. "That's wot fresh air does for yer!"

"Ar," said Dad Burrage.

The fire was crackling now. May reached over and took up the iron pot out of the hearth. She set it over the round, gaping hole of the stove.

Dot lingered. "You goin' out, May?"

"Wot's it ter do with you?"

"All right, Miss. I don't care, I'm sure." She looked at her sister critically. "You're getting a size, I must say."

"Take care you don't get the same way," said Stan, wiping his bread around the dripping pot.

"Mind you don't get *yourself* in trouble, feller," retorted Dot. She went out and climbed the stairs. Presently Bill leaned back and said, "Dad, we've enlisted."

"Wot, both of you?"

"That's right."

Dad Burrage sucked in his teeth reflectively. Then he spat. "Serves yer right," he said rancorously. "This country's done nothink fer you. Don't see no call for you to do nothink fer it."

Bill summed up for the pair of them. "Makes a change," he said. "Comin', Stan?"

They both rose and made towards the back door.

"W'en do you go?" shouted dad.

"Soon enough," Stan answered.

"Let 'em go," said May.

"I suppose I'll keep the 'ole perishin' lot of yer then," said dad.

May looked at him. "Not if I can 'elp it. I'm goin' to the Courts with my feller. Get maintenance, that's wot I'll do. Pity I can't get it from you."

"Ain't I always been a good father to you?" There was a whine of self-pity in his tone.

"Oh, go along." May lumbered to her feet. "If them kids yell, let 'em yell. You goin' out?"

"I mebbe."

"Well, I am." She went upstairs and exchanged her shawl for one slightly less torn. She dragged a comb through her hair and put on a wide-brimmed, battered straw hat. When she came down the children were still whimpering.

"There's 'ot water there if you want a drop of tea." she called. "Dad, did you' ear?"

"I 'eard."

"Well, so long."

Dad Burrage grunted. Presently he, too, went out and the children whimpered alone.

* * * * *

May thought that even the pub was better, now that there was a war on. First place, it was more bright! The small, sanded bar, the entrance to the jug and bottle, the parlour—all overflowed with dank, steamy humanity, spreading themselves out into the street where the children played and wrangled.

May liked it. She liked the noise, too. It made her feel right to hear hoarse voices that she knew, shouting pleasantries across the packed heads around the bar. She saw Mrs. Sedge jammed against the wall, clutching a glass of porter. She nodded at Mrs. Sedge, half defiantly, and had the wave of a hand back for recognition.

"'Ullo!" called Mrs. Sedge. "'Ow d'you like the idear of war? Orlright, eh?" She rumbled with gargantuan and licentious belly rumbles, appreciating the inference of her own words. "Orlright if yer young."

"I don't mind." May was not enthusiastic, but such a reply—from her—constituted enthusiasm. She looked around her. Whom, she debated, was "good fer a drink"? May saw dad, over the edge of the bar, crushed away between a cluster of ragged men, his eyes still as downcast as ever. Over the top of the bar fluttered a Union Jack, the cap bands from two sailors, and tricolour.

The word "war" ran like larva over the press of men and women. They drank it with their porter; they fumbled with it in their minds, seeking to find pictures among themselves to which they could apply it. They had the Boer War for recollection. The men who had served and survived were in high favour.

"I'll buy you a drink," said one of these to May.

"All right," said May.

He called for some porter, went on with his story. May lounged against the bar shelf.

"There was a notice out for 'im," said the old soldier. "Reward twelve pounds—Winston Churchill, alive or dead. He beat 'em. He's a sharp one. . . ."

"Frien' of yours?" inquired May sociably.

The cluster of men guffawed. "Nah?" said the old soldier. "Ain't yer never heard of Winston Churchill?"

"No," said May indifferently. She was looking towards the door. Her soldier had come in. She saw him bend his head to speak to a woman who sat in line with the entrance. She watched with animal intensity. The man who had bought her a drink was going on with his story.

" 'Ee went to a house and taking a gamble, as it were, 'ee asked for help. Days and days they 'id 'im . . . went away in a truck at larst. . . ."

May was watching her soldier. The words of the man at her side were floating around like scraps of fluttering paper on the edge of her consciousness. She was only partly aware of them. The rest of her was waiting. Like a cow.

He saw her suddenly. A heavy look of recognition and annoyance flickered across his face. He put up one hand, as if to say, "Be over presently," then he went on talking to the other woman. May watched him unswervingly. He had thick, straight black hair; there was very little space between where his hair ended and his eyes were placed. His mouth was large, loose, the lower lip predominated.

"And 'ee got clean away," finished the ex-soldier. "Had the larf of 'em all. Wonder wot 'ee'll do this time?"

The men began to talk about this war. May still leaned, with her back pressed against the bar, and her belly upthrust indifferently. Someone else refilled her glass. She sipped it. Her eyes never wavered from the soldier near the doorway. She saw dad stumble out and go around to the back. Figures lounged back and forth across the doorway incessantly. Someone had started singing a popular song . . . from the last time . . . "Goodbye Dolly Gray." Presently there would be the new songs.

"I'm goin' 'ome," said May suddenly. No one took any notice of what she said. "So long."

No one answered. She went towards the door. "Comin' along all right, May?" asked someone as she pushed a pathway for herself.

"Right enough," said May.

A man sniggered. May flung a filthy word at him. The reply cracked back. May's soldier looked up with a flicker of interest in his eyes. He liked what he called a "spunky woman," one who gave as good as she got. He saw her, face flushed, spitting filth. "That's right," he said approvingly, "give the bassturds hell. 'Ere, come on outside, I want a word with you."

" 'Bout time," said May.

"I 'ad ter be perlite, didn't I? That person is a friend of my mum."

"Where does yer mum live," said May resentfully. "I ain't never met your mum."

"But you shall, girl. W'en this war's over. Be over in a few weeks. Everyone says so. You'll see. Then I'll be back."

She got hold of that. "You're goin' away, Fred?"

"Orders is orders, girl."

"And wot about me? Wot orders 'as I got? Like I am. It's yours, you know, Fred. No lies."

"That's all right," said the soldier. He pinched her arm. When he got her along the wall at the side of the pub he pushed her against the bricks. Stood with one arm on each side of her, his body slanting forwards for support. "I've told you. It'll be over in a few weeks. Long before you drop that lot. Like as not we'll be dossin' down again together by then."

"Straight?" said May.

"Straight."

"Well, w'en are you goin'?"

"Termorrer."

That, too, she accepted. "You orf now?"

"I got time," he told her, "ter walk along a bit. Anybody at 'ome?"

"Nobody only the kids."

"Well, are yer goin' to ask me in fer a bit?"

"You can if yer like."

He took down his hands. He straightened himself. May moved off beside him. She went along on the outside of him. Two steps to his one. Mincingly. It was an expression of her pride in the masculine attention—instead of her normal stride. Two steps to his one—like a lady. The flowers danced in her battered hat. She trod in the gutter with utter disregard. Neither of them spoke any more. The soldier loped along. She pattered at his side, a ridiculous action with her figure, but neither of them noticed it. They came to The Rock, turned down the side alley, and went in through the back door. The wheeled soap-box that the children had been playing with was still in the yard. The soldier fell over it in the growing dusk. He swore. Went in rubbing his shin. May followed. After looking behind her she set the rusty bolt. "Let 'em 'ammer," she said as she went on up the stairs.

CHAPTER II

PRUDENCE LESTER sat erectly, holding the reins between her fingers. Geraldine sat beside her, wearing a burnt straw hat with a wreath of poppies around the brim. The dog-cart in which they sat inched its way forward along the crowded street. Easterbridge out shopping.

All along the main street ranged the carriages: broughams, phaetons, victorias, dog-carts, governess-carts, and motor-cars. The County was out. It was shopping for the war which, it declared, would only last for a few weeks; yet for which, in despite of this belief, every woman was out purchasing, to the limits of her purse, sugar and flour, tinned and bottled luxuries, soap, and a number of improbable and unexpected extras as prompted by the imagination of the individual concerned. The grocers' assistants were sweating. The wine merchants were booking unprecedented orders. Even Henry Truslove, marching about the aisles of the emporium, rubbed his hands with pleasure as the lesser folk came in

and spent their gold, "while there was still stuff to buy." That was the general note in the little market town after the declaration of war. Let's buy—and buy—and buy! It may be over in a few weeks. If it is there will be no harm done. *If it is not, which is, of course unthinkable,* then we have taken a very wise precaution.

Henry Truslove, who was a thinking, listening, ferreting, far-seeing little man, entertained the private opinion that this war would not be over in so many weeks, but, more likely, in so many years. It was not for nothing that he had been employed by Mr. Heatherstead in the past, and even now, when he was the manager of the emporium, and an alderman besides, he did not scorn to remember the view of a man to whom this war had been visible from a long way off. Henry remembered Mr. Heatherstead's opinions and deductions. He, personally, hoped that they would prove correct. Henry was still very ambitious. He had perfect mental serenity upon the point of his own immunity from war service. His excessively flat feet, and his other rather ignominious complaint, debarred him, he knew well enough, from military activity. Therefore, he rubbed his hands. This war *might,* if a man played his cards aright, lead to a number of profitable engagements. There was no knowing, in fact, to what distance a far-seeing man might travel if he kept his eyes and ears open, and was prepared to take a few risks.

Meantime, Geraldine sat in the dog-cart beside Prudence Lester and thought about a great many things at once, which caused her mind to be in a state of painful confusion. Highly sensitized as she was, and jointly, at that time, passing through the intensely painful processes of adolescence, Geraldine was the victim of her own conflicting emotions. Some no more than perfectly natural to a female of her age, some the uncomfortable concommitants of her particular mentality.

Quite normally, and for some time, she had entertained romantic ideas about Peter Heatherstead. When Peter was sixteen and she was ten, when, in fact, they had first met, on the lawns of Prudence Lester's newly inherited country house, Geraldine had regarded the tall, white-flannelled figure with instant adoration. When two years later she had seen him again, with his unruly curly hair brushed down to chestnut glistening order, in all the glory of his last year at school, she had remained sleepless for the best part of two nights because he had promised to take her fishing. He addressed her as "infant" and pulled at her two fair pigtails. She had gone fishing with him. She had said wild prayers under her breath as, under his instruction, she made her first cast—and, "please, God, don't let me make a mistake," she mumbled so many times that Peter asked finally, "What on earth are you saying under your breath, Geraldine?"

Being of an agonizingly truthful turn of mind, Geraldine told him—with crimson cheeks and eyes clouded with sudden tears. Because he had not laughed at her, but had, in fact, seemed to approve of her serious attitude towards the sport of angling, she had added another grace to his list of perfections.

When they met again after he had come down for his first vacation from Cambridge, the sudden comradeship which they had built up between

them, with angling as a base, had at first become faintly awkward by reason of Geraldine's budding maturity. As Peter had told her, half mockingly, "You're almost a young lady, Geraldine." But this had soon passed and they resumed their pleasant comradeship.

"Almost," Geraldine told herself angrily, when nearly a year later she sat beside her aunt in the dog-cart and they whirled into the town, "when I am grown up, I'll be haugthy with him, that's what I'll do!" *So* much for normal childishness. There was sufficient of this in her make-up to make her hunger for the time when she could sweep grandly into rooms and be haughty with young men who had disparaged her previous youthfulness. For the rest, she was unable to sustain anger with the same young man whom she knew might presently be killed in this war.

"How long will it be before Peter is a soldier?" she asked Prudence Lester.

"Oh, about six week, dear, I expect. Now that he has applied for his commission he will have to wait until he is sent for for an interview. After that there will be medical examinations, uniform to buy, a number of things before he is fully equipped. And even then there is his period of training. He can't just get into a brand new uniform and go out to fight."

"No, I suppose not." Geraldine's voice rose hopefully. "Perhaps it will be all over before he has time to fight?"

"Perhaps it will. Please God it may be so. Oh, there is that dreadful Truslove that used to work for Charles. Bowing and scraping. How I dislike that man!"

"What makes some people so much nastier than others?" Geraldine inquired.

"You know, Gerry," Prudence Lester smiled wryly, "I am partly in harmony with you in your desire to grow up quickly. Perhaps when you have grown up you will cease to ask unanswerable questions."

"There must be some answer," the girl persisted.

"There are several answers. But they are only partial. None is perfectly complete. That indefinable thing called personality has such a gigantic part to play in making persons nice and nasty."

"Well, what *is* personality?"

"Man's essential spirit shining through his words and actions."

"Does my essential spirit shine through my words and actions?"

Prudence Lester so far forgot herself as to turn and stare at her ward. "It certainly does," she said emphatically. "Oh, Gerry, Gerry, I wonder if your dear mother and I have done right by you."

Geraldine's eyes were interested but untroubled. "How do you mean?"

"We, your mother and I, knew by the time you were born that life was so full of dishonesties and subterfuges that it was almost impossible to avoid them, no matter how one was placed, but being, both of us, women who rather liked difficulties, we set ourselves out to take those things from your surroundings to such an extent that we hoped when you did grow up they would be so alien to you that you would instinctively ignore them, by reason of your environment."

"Well, if you *have* succeeded in doing that for me, won't it be rather wonderful."

"Yes—and no. I can't help feeling, my dear, that life will always owe you something you will never take, because you will find the price unacceptable."

Geraldine frowned. "Can you explain that a bit more?"

Mrs. Lester gathered the reins more firmly in time to avert an accident. "All right, I'll try," she said. "If I offered you something you wanted terrifically, and in order to give it to you you knew I had to hurt someone else, what would you say?"

Geraldine stared at a space just above the tip of the pony's ears.

"It wouldn't be much good to me," she said at last, "even if I would take it, would it?"

"Go on, Gerry, explain."

She clasped her gloved hands together tightly in her lap. "Well, what I mean is this. I don't suppose I shall be able to say it very well. But it burns up inside me. I should be wondering about the hurt too much to enjoy the thing, whatever it was. I adore driving with you. I adore coming into Easterbridge to shop, but it's quite spoiled to-day because of thinking about the war. I don't know anything about war yet, but knowing, as Uncle Charles said last night, that already 'Europe is stained with fresh young blood,' I keep on seeing the blood and the waste . . . like he said."

"As he said, dear," said Prudence absently. "You know, if you didn't get into some nice healthy scrapes from time to time I should say you were dangerously near to becoming a little prig! There is your Uncle Charles now, wave to him, there's a good child. Bella is feeling the strain at having to cope with my erratic driving this morning. I shall have to give her a little attention." Mrs. Lester reined in the pony gently, Charles Heatherstead turned his head from the group with whom he was talking, and "Uncle Charles!" called Geraldine, "Uncle Charles, will you come over here and talk to us?"

He came over to them. Bella, the pony, stood obediently beside the kerb, and Charles leaned over the rim of the dog-cart. He looked very tired, very old, far older than his years, which were in themselves no longer slight.

"You look very charming this morning, my dear," he said, smiling at Geraldine. "I wish this morning that my nephew had been a niece."

"Your swans are geese to-day, Charles?"

"Just a little. Peter has applied for his commission. He went up to Cambridge this morning to collect some of his property and fulfil his obligations."

"And then?"

Charles Heatherstead shrugged his shoulders. "And then, my dear," he said wryly, "in due course there will be a medical examination—and as I haven't the slightest doubt that Peter is A1, he will appear presently in all the splendour of a subaltern's uniform."

"But Aunt Prudence told me," Geraldine leaned over the rim of the

dog-cart eagerly, "that it would take so many months for his training that the war might be over before he would be ready to fight."

"May your aunt be right, Geraldine." Charles Heatherstead looked around him at the hurrying figures. At the lane of vehicles. "Somehow, I have a fear that it will not be over quite so quickly as we imagine, as I have already said. Oh, by the way, Prudence, Charles Soames has gone, he enlisted immediately. You might find time to have a word with his wife. She is—er—there is going to be another addition to the family."

Prudence promised that this should be done. "In the meantime," she gathered up the reins, "when does Peter return?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"Then perhaps you will both dine with us?"

Charles promised that they would. The dog-cart moved off. And presently it became submerged in the press and was lost to sight.

* * * * *

In every way, Prudence Lester found the morning unpleasant. She was distressed generally at the world news, more distressed at the personal; and she regarded Peter's immediate "rushing into uniform" as quite unnecessary at this juncture. There would be time enough for that, she decided, without his cutting short his university career, and causing his guardian unnecessary anxiety. At the same time there was a measure of solace to be found here in that, despite her disapproval, she was intensely proud of what she privately regarded as Peter's absolutely natural gesture. But, however much she strove to balance her international and personal scales, one event booked no tolerance, was fraught with nothing but unpleasantness.

Just as she turned the dog-cart round at the farther end of the town and gathered up the reins to begin the slow ascent of the hill, Alaric Dingleby turned out of a side street, paused against the kerb, stared at both herself and Geraldine, and, Prudence had been perfectly sure, recognized something very familiar about them both, even supposing his recognition was not accurate. There was enough in his expression for her to know that he would start inquiries as to their identities at least.

She had known ever since she had returned to the county that some such encounter had been inevitable. But, secure in the knowledge that there was no one in her wide circle of friends who would countenance Alaric for an instant, she had hoped that as there was no fear of them meeting socially, any other meeting might be avoided indefinitely. She had looked away quickly. She had replied to some remark of Geraldine's. But anxiety was dragging her. It was swiftly answered. The strange, haggard, gaunt figure, in the outmoded dirty clothing and the fantastic Victorian headgear, went swaggering down the hill, stick waving, coat flapping. . . .

"Who is that odd-looking man, Aunt?" asked Geraldine. "He reminds me of someone. He is so strange. Do you know who he is?"

Just like that. It had come. And there was very little Prudence could do about it. She waited so long that Geraldine repeated the question.

"Yes," said Prudence slowly, "I do."

The silence grew between them once more while Prudence strove with her thoughts frantically.

"Why don't you want to talk about him?" Geraldine asked.

"Oh, dear," said Prudence.

"Have you a reason?"

"Yes," she said desperately, "I have."

Try as she would, she could say nothing more. All the old sordid story came spiralling back at her out of the past, growing in magnitude, growing in horror. The conversation with Charles upon this very subject was still fresh in her mind.

They breasted the hill. They turned to the left; presently the houses thinned. Hedges replaced railings and they were out in the open country. While Prudence strove with her memories, Geraldine sat beside her without speaking, trying to recollect what was familiar about the strange man. She sought about patiently in her recollections. They stirred in the direction of the Knightsbridge house where she had lived before her mother died. Like all children, she found very early memory difficult. Presently she ceased to battle and let her mind drift casually from sequence to sequence.

"Are you still thinking about him, child?"

"Yes, I am. I'm sorry if *you* don't want to talk about him. But I have a feeling I have seen him before. Am I right?"

Thankfully, Prudence answered, "No, you are not. I give you my word that you have never seen him before in your life."

Geraldine's childishness persisted. "Then have I seen a photograph of him?"

"Very possibly."

She was quick. Moreover, she was persistent. She sat a little longer and then she shot out the words, "Is he something to do with us, something about which you are ashamed?"

"Yes."

"Aunty, won't you tell me? I'm not a little girl any more. If she *is* part of us in some way and you are unhappy about it, why won't you let me know, too. I shan't mind."

Prudence touched up the pony's flanks with her whip. A reflex gesture. "Well, I think you would. Your Uncle Charles thinks you would. Won't you be satisfied to leave it until you're older?"

Geraldine thought about that, too. They came to the drive gates and turned in off the road. They exchanged the perfume of late honeysuckle for the drift from the rose garden. The noonday sun was hot about their shoulders, and the soft tranquillity enfolded them as the dog-cart came into view of the house. Old and tranquil, it stood sentinel over the lawns. All thought of Alaric was alien in such a place!

When they reached the steps, Geraldine swung down and came round to the pony's head.

"I think," she said, lifting her grey eyes steadily to her aunt's face,

"that I would much rather know than go on guessing. And I will go on guessing if you don't tell me."

"Very well." Prudence shook out her skirts. "You shall have your wish. But first you must allow me to talk to your Uncle Charles."

"Well, he is coming to dinner in two days' time. Will you talk to him then?"

"Yes, after dinner, and when we have talked you shall join us and ask us any questions you wish. In the meantime, I suggest you go and tidy your hair and wash your hands, as luncheon will be ready shortly."

Prudence handed over the dog-cart to the servant who came down the steps and went thoughtfully into the house to phone Charles Heatherstead.

* * * * *

When Peter Heatherstead came back two days later, he flung down his bags in the hall, paid off the cabby, and went streaking up the stairs to his uncle's study.

"Can I come in, sir?" He poked his head around the door. "And are there any letters for me?"

"Yes, to the first; no, to the second." Charles Heatherstead was at his desk writing. He swung round on his swivelled chair, his pipe belching fiercely, a considerable deposit of snuff upon his waistcoat. "I might suggest that 'stand not upon the order of thy coming in' might be an apt misquotation. Are you returned for a reasonable period or are you dashing in on your way to France?"

"Yes, to the first." Peter grinned at him. "Sorry for the row, sir, I hoped there might be something here about my interview."

Charles Heatherstead looked at him, a strange look of mingled amusement and tenderness. "Rarin' to go, aren't you?"

"You'd be with me if you could make it." Peter hitched forward a chair and began groping in his pockets for a pipe. "But honestly, sir, you don't really mind, do you? I mean, you may *mind*, but you wouldn't want me not to?"

"Ah, that's more like it. I do mind—but I still want you to go. Let's leave it at that, shall we? I mind chiefly because I regret the waste of time when you might be absorbing a little classical education. At the same time, I mind selfishly because I should miss you out of all proportion to your worth if anything happened to you."

"Nothing's going to happen to me." Peter helped himself liberally from the tobacco-jar on the desk and rammed home the baccy with his thumb. "The devil takes care of his own. I'll come back covered in medals and unharmed—see if I don't."

"That's the trouble," said Charles Heatherstead wryly. "If you don't, I shall probably still be here to see."

"This is a damned gloomy conversation, isn't it, sir?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I'm feeling gloomy, and not all on account of you. If you care to spare me a few moments of your valuable time, I'd tell you something about it. But before I begin, let me tell you first that we are dining with Mrs. Lester."

Peter slid down in the shabby arm-chair until he was resting chiefly upon the back on his neck. "Suits me," he murmured. "Now go ahead with your story."

"It's not a story." Charles Heatherstead laid down his pencil and put his hands together. "It's a point I want to make in case you might store it in your memory and come to remember it some time when you are faced with a major decision."

"Such as?"

"You'll hear. First, I want to remind you of something. I want you to remember at all times that while it takes a major upheaval to disturb the dead from their graves, it takes only a slight and trivial incident to resurrect a scandal. It is one of the most remarkable facets of human life—how little is needed to set off a 'dead' scandal and inflict upon the innocent some of the onus of those long-ago mistakes."

"Here, wait a bit." Peter pulled at his pipe for a moment. "There's no need to talk in riddles. I *know* what you're getting at. It's the Dingleby thing. Something's set that off again."

Charles Heatherstead stared. His whole demeanour became symbolic of utter astonishment. He looked at his nephew as if he were seeing him for the first time.

"What do you know about the Dingleby scandal?"

"All of it. I know the whole thing. All about her not being married when old Dingleby brought her to the house."

"Young Dingleby," corrected Mr. Heatherstead mechanically.

"Well, he's old to me. And I know about Lady Dingleby breaking her neck because she was drunk, and the actress old-young Dingleby lived with . . . d'you want me to go on?"

"No, thank you, I do not. But I would very much like to know why a closely guarded secret like this is common knowledge to you."

"Then I'll tell you," said Peter generously, obviously enjoying the effects of his disclosure and obviously not very much impressed by the story. "There's nothing closely guarded about it, so far as I know. It's common talk. As you know, I like a drink of beer with the locals. You've never tried to stop me. Except to remind me there's reason in all things, with which I entirely agree. Well, I've heard it in the taverns —I've heard it at the billiards saloon—I've heard it in a dozen places. The whole town knows about it."

Mr. Heatherstead repeated the words, "The whole town knows about it? Well, how in the name of fortune does the whole town know?" He leaped out of his chair and began quartering the small room, flinging out sharp, staccato shreds of sentence. "Whole thing most closely guarded . . . Proberty the soul of discretion . . . never breathed a word myself . . . . can't make head or tail of it."

Peter remained where he was, resting peacefully, until he considered his uncle had emitted sufficient steam. Then he said equably, "Have you forgotten the servants?"

"What servants?"

"The Dingleby servants. Do you imagine they didn't know everything

that was going on in that house. Jellaby runs a pub the other side of the Green. Think he doesn't talk?"

"Evidently," said Mr. Heatherstead dryly, pausing in his perambulations, "he does, because you know him and you know he comes from 'Laurelston'."

"Exactly. Now, go on, sir, and tell me what's started *you* off again on this theme. It doesn't really matter who knows and who doesn't."

Mr. Heatherstead rubbed his hair perplexedly. "It seems not to. The modern viewpoint is certainly surprising. Well, it so happens that Aunt Prudence and Geraldine were shopping in Easterbridge two days ago and they happened by ill-fortune to encounter Alaric Dingleby emerging from a side road just as they drew level with him. He looked at them and they at him. Aunt Prudence declares that he recognized something familiar in both of them. Geraldine immediately asked who he was and became intensely curious. Aunt Prudence put her off as much as possible. But she could not quieten her entirely. It seems, Aunt Prudence told me on the telephone subsequently, that Geraldine has extracted a promise from her to tell her the whole story, subject to a meeting between us *first*, and I can't for the life of me see how she is going to tell such a tale to such a young girl who will take it all most frightfully to heart, and remember I deliberately put her off at the tennis party!"

"Ah!" Peter's expression had gradually changed during this last speech, and he now looked grave enough to suit his uncle. "That does present a problem, I agree. There are parts of that story one couldn't tell to any young girl of Geraldine's age, let alone to Geraldine."

"I am glad you agree," murmured his uncle.

"But," Peter went on, talking almost more to himself than to an audience, "she must be told something, because, if she isn't, she'll put herself through such a hell of imaginings in her funny little mind that she'll be far worse off than if she knew everything."

There was something very like astonishment on the older man's face. "You seem to have thought a great deal about the state of Geraldine's mind," he said.

"Oh, I have," said Peter. "Geraldine is a very interesting person. Even if she is only fifteen."

No trace of his inward amusement flickered on Mr. Heatherstead's controlled features at this Olympian attitude of twenty-one to fifteen.

"Later on," Peter added, still more than half talking to himself, "she is going to be beautiful as well, and she will never know it."

"Let us confine ourselves to the present shall we?" Mr. Heatherstead suggested. "Have you an idea of how much Geraldine should be told?"

"Not yet, sir—damn, my pipe's gone out; can I trouble you for a match? Oh, thanks—no, I don't know yet what to suggest, but I might have an idea by this evening. If that will suit."

Mr. Heatherstead passed the matches and signified that that would do very well.

"What's happened to old Dingleby recently?" asked Peter, after he had enveloped himself in clouds of smoke.

"More women," said Mr. Heatherstead distastefully, "and less money, more talk, and less action. A certain amount of drunkenness, a great deal of dirt, and nothing at all for anyone but himself. He's the most utterly worthless man it has ever been my misfortune to meet. As a matter of fact, he isn't a man. Because except in one direction, which he makes so apparent, that I sometimes entertain grave doubts even as to his virility —except in this one respect, he has no male attributes. Faugh!" he gestured disgustedly, "the topic offends my palate."

"All right, I only wanted to know. What became of his wife?"

"Theodora Dingleby," said Charles Heatherstead, "disappeared on the day of Lady Dingleby's funeral. She left nothing behind her that belonged to her. She took nothing that was not her own. She was an extraordinary woman. Old Proberty had dealings with her, naturally, as beneficiary under Lady Dingleby's will. But he has never vouchsafed, and I have never asked, where she is or anything about her. So far as Easterbridge is concerned—she is dead. I did have reason to ask Proberty recently if Dingleby ever heard from her. He just said, 'No, no, no, dear me, no,' a great many times and left it at that."

"In what way was she extraordinary, sir?"

"In her attitude to that disastrous household. In the first place, I think it is fairly clear that she married Alaric in order to escape from the stage. She was then already past the first bloom of youth! Then, after an orgy of spending in London, when the couple returned to 'Laurelston,' Theodora took over the running of the entire household, attached herself with great devotion to Lady Dingleby, waited on her till the day of her death, and even treated Amelia with kindness and consideration, despite the fact that Amelia had grossly insulted her."

"What's so extraordinary about that? Might the poor woman not have had decent motives?"

"She might, Peter. But the interesting point is, *did* she? Or did she play a subtle and carefully planned game in order to line her own nest when the time should come for her to leave Dingleby?"

Peter leaned forward in his chair. "Are you trying to suggest that she herself imposed a time-limit upon her stay in the house?"

"Yes, I am—or rather," Mr. Heatherstead corrected himself, "Proberty does. He says that Theodora was carefully hoarding away such money as she got from Dingleby, the jewels he had bought her and her furs, and any little thing she got from Lady Dingleby, against the day when she could clear out. Further—and may I be forgiven for being a wicked old man if my acceptance of Proberty's theories is not true!—we both believe that she had a hand in Lady Dingleby's drinking. Someone supplied her with unlimited quantities of brandy. It was not her maid Victoria. She gradually turned against Victoria, although she had previously leaned upon her, and in the end, so Victoria told Proberty, she was almost entirely excluded from her service."

Peter frowned. "Are you suggesting . . ." he trailed off.

Mr. Heatherstead nodded. "Morally, yes. Not factually. We have no grounds. Proberty and I have spent hours carefully tracing and retracing

the ground over which we are skipping now. Good heavens, boy, how you have led me away! This is most unprofitable. The whole affair is dead and gone. What matters now is you young things. Geraldine. She matters. Going to be a fine woman, Geraldine. Can't have her hurt. She hurts easily."

Peter rose to his feet and stretched himself. "Don't you think," he asked, "all really worth-while people hurt fairly easily?"

* * * * *

When he came down the stairs with his uncle a little before six-thirty that evening, Peter had decided what in his opinion must be done about Geraldine. However, wise beyond his years, he restrained the impulse to blurt out his suggestion immediately, but contented himself with generalities until the carriage was well under way. Then he said rather diffidently, "Would you and Aunt Prudence very much mind, sir, if I told Geraldine about Dingleby?"

"You, sir?" Charles Heatherstead shot up his eyebrows alarmingly, and worked them like signals of his agitation for some moments. "Well now, really, m'boy—never heard such a thing—can't feel Prudence would agree . . . but the idea has possibilities . . . youth to youth . . . might be a good thing. Damme, I don't really know." At this point he stretched out a fine, veined hand and patted his nephew's knee. "Better let me have a word with Aunt Prudence. See what she has to say about it. Y'know, the more I think of it myself the better I like it. Young things *do* know how to approach one another. Better than the old. . . ." Doubts began to oppose him once more . . . he shot back to his original reaction, "Can't help feeling . . . an elderly lady might regard such a conversation as most unseemly . . . really, I cannot say. You know this will need some consideration."

"That's what I thought, sir," said Peter with great calm. He produced a dubious-looking pink paper from his pocket. "I brought this along, I thought you might like to think in peace."

"*What is that you are reading?*" Charles Heatherstead was peering in awful disapproval.

"Only the *Pink 'Un*, sir. Nothing in it at all—really, I assure you."

"The *Pink 'Un*!" The sound that accompanied this was precious like a snort. "Well, go along then, read your disgusting rubbish and leave me to a little constructive thought."

The remainder of the journey was silent and extremely peaceful. As they turned in at the gates, Peter folded the paper into a small pad and slid it into his pocket, carefully arranging the lapel over it so that no startling dash of pink should mar his appearance—and reputation.

Just after seven o'clock they entered the drawing-room.

* * * * *

Geraldine was sitting by the open windows. She sprang up as they came in, the pale primrose-yellow of her skirts outlined against the last

slanting rays of the sun. It glinted upon the bronze ribbons in her hair and on her narrow bronze slippers.

"A new frock?" asked Charles.

"Yes, Uncle Charles, do you like it?" He looked from the dress to her young face, slightly flushed, her eyes anxious for his verdict.

"You are most exquisitely young," he told her. "Prudence, I congratulate you. Your niece is growing up—and at the same time is quite the spirit of youth."

"Well, I can only hope," said Peter, joining her at the windows, "you are not too grand a young lady this evening to come treacling with me after dinner."

The flush deepened to eagerness. "Of course not. May I, Aunt Prudence?"

"You may." Prudence Lester had resumed her embroidery and the needle glinted, too, as it plunged in and out of the frame-taut tapestry. "So long as you do not expect either Uncle Charles or I to smear our hands with your unengaging messes, and bark our shins in the half light on tree-trunks, you may treacle till midnight. With the proviso, of course, that you change your slippers."

Geraldine made swift promises and sat down again. She and Peter began a spirited argument upon the merits of rum in their concoctions.

"I cannot consider it fitting to make the poor moths tipsy," protested Prudence. "If they must die in the cause of entymology, could it not be with less indignity?"

"Grudge them not a pleasant death," murmured Charles.

"Is it pleasant to be tipsy, Uncle Charles?"

He groaned. "You are disconcertingly literal," he protested. "If you must know, to certain depraved characters, the exercise is most pleasant."

"Well, are moths depraved?"

Peter began to laugh at her, and she rounded on him. "I only want to know," she said hotly. "I don't see why you should laugh."

They began to wrangle, and while Peter soothed her indignation, Charles began to talk quietly to his companion.

"Peter made the astonishing suggestion this afternoon that he should tell Geraldine about Alaric," he said quietly. "At first I vetoed the idea —on more mature judgment I deemed it sound. He will undertake the duty to-night if you give your sanction."

"Why not?" said Prudence calmly. "The young animal always vibrates more comfortably to another young animal than to the elders of the herd. By all means, let him tell her. His own lack of knowledge will force him to ignore what we should have to evade!"

"Dear me, Prudence, you are most unorthodox in your reactions!"

"Better be unorthodox than unimaginative," she retorted.

There was a faint flicker of mockery in his old eyes. "Are you suggesting that orthodoxy stultifies imagination?"

"Certainly." Her needle dipped in and out violently. "Carried to the lengths of exotic clothing and uncleanly habits, such a conviction is dangerous. Under reasonable control it is merely intelligent."

"There is very little of the Victorian in you, Prudence," he mused. "You are very much more of to-morrow than to-day."

"Oh, no, I'm not—you know, I find myself increasingly prone to condemnation as I get older. It's part of the ageing process. What was not accepted when I was young, is very difficult for me to accept now. But I have a perfect horror of limitations. I hate to think that because I am now upon the decline physically, I should necessarily retire within the tiny circle of my age. I want, in so far as is possible, to be young in my approach to the young, without committing the solecism of being kittenish."

Charles Heatherstead rumbled with laughter. The spectacle of the gaunt, dignified widow becoming kittenish was too much for his gravity. "I don't think there is very much fear of that," he told her, "but I appreciate your point. Nowhere is this age business more conspicuous than in relation to literature. One's choice of reading matter! I find myself turning more and more towards old friends. Familiar favourites. I find it quite an effort to approach with an unbiased criticism all that is new and unproven in the world of letters. And yet I force myself to realize that, since every age has its great writers, there is no reason to suppose that among the young ones of to-day there are not the giants of to-morrow."

They were unaware that the wrangling had ceased on the window-seat and that they had an audience.

"If more people had your views," said Peter, "people of our ages wouldn't find it so difficult to live."

"Do you find it difficult to live, Peter?"

"Yes—in the way you're talking about. M'tutor talks to me of Shakespeare and I try to talk to him of Shaw. I believe that Shaw will be as great as Shakespeare was. M'tutor *knows* differently, or thinks he does, because he knows Shakespeare and he doesn't know Shaw. Not in the same way. He approaches Shaw with rather condescending criticism. So he's biased. You two are never biased."

"Aren't we," said Prudence, laying aside her work, "that's just what you think! We're dreadfully biased, but we do at least try. A damning epitaph, but our own. Now, come along, children. I can hear the gong. Shall we go into dinner?"

* * * * *

When dinner was over and the young moon arched its slender back over the blackening tree-tops, Geraldine and Peter went out across the lawn towards the woods. There was an exquisite waiting silence over the darkened world, and the distant hoot of an owl was a clarion call amid tranquillity.

Instinctively they dropped their voices and spoke softly as they skirted the lawn and made for the shadowed fringes of trees. The crisp twigs crackled under their feet; a bird, disturbed in the shrubbery, set up a faint bleat of cheeping, and subsided with a soft frou-frou of fluttering wings. A bat spiralled off over their heads on its wavering flight. The

stars spangled the heavens like tears upon a sable cloak. The gentle air was filled with poignant whisperings.

"Anything could happen on a night like this," said Geraldine softly.

"What sort of anything?"

"Oh, little people—fairies. I could see Titania, I am sure, if only I could look hard enough. This is all real enchantment. Somewhere in this wood lurks Puck—and on a bough hangs 'an enamelled skin weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in.' I like Shakespeare," she added defiantly.

Peter said, "*Henry Five*" dreamily, and then, "Oh, damn," as he fell across a broken branch.

"What about *Henry Five?*"

"Oh, I dunno. Only, I thought about that bit, 'and gentlemen in England now abed will think themselves accursed they were not here, and hold their manhood cheap while any speaks that fought with us upon St. Crispin's day . . .' That's how I feel about France."

"Suppose you are killed?"

"I shall not be killed." The sureness of his young voice was beyond challenge. "I shall come back."

"To this wood?"

"To this wood. I'll come back again and smear the trees just as we are going to do to-night."

Somewhere in England a young poet was groping with words, as yet unwritten. Groping with the epitaphs of such young men—and among them, himself. Somewhere in England, soon, he would write, "And there's some corner of a foreign field that is for ever England" . . . and "Blow out yon bugles over the rich dead." That poet, and Peter, and those other unforgettable hundreds had also been at Cambridge together. Theirs was an eternal brotherhood.

Presently Geraldine and Peter began their work. Their dark figures moved in ghostly communion from tree to tree, and when they had done they went off through the familiar ways till they came to a pool which they themselves had dredged. It was fed by a stream which meandered idly through the wood, and there was a long, thick elm branch which projected, low-hung, over the water.

"Let's get out on the limb," suggested Geraldine.

"Well, what about your frock?"

"Never mind my frock. You go first, and then turn your back."

He clambered out, swearing comfortably at the snarls upon the branch. He heard her voice behind him. "Now turn round."

"All right."

He heard her movements behind him, heard her breathing as she wriggled along the branch.

"All right—I'm here—you can turn."

He swivelled round, and saw that she had leaned her back against the bent tree-trunk with her legs stretching along the branch.

"You look comfortable."

"I am."

Over their heads the moon sailed high. They could see each other's faces palely in the moon-glow.

"I wonder how soon you will go," said Geraldine thoughtfully.

"Oh, in a few weeks, and even then I'll come back for my leaves."

"I may be at school. Aunt Prudence says I have to be finished."

"Oh, Lord," Peter groaned. "That means you'll come back all missish, and you won't climb branches. But you'll chatter and be just another silly girl."

"That would be horrible," she decided. "I don't think I shall, you know. I shan't change easily. But you will."

"What makes you think so?"

"That's what the world does to you."

"Well, perhaps," he said consolingly, "we'll both change the same way and then we shall still be comfortable together."

"I hope so," she said fervently.

Peter thought hard about what he had to say, and after a while decided to take the plunge.

"You know that man you saw in Easterbridge a few days ago?"

"What man?"

"The thin man in the queer clothes that stared at you."

"How did you know?"

"I'll tell you if you wait a bit. Uncle Charles told me that Aunt Geraldine was worried because you'd seen him. She didn't want you to know about him yet."

"I know. I asked but she promised to tell me after she'd talked to Uncle Charles. Why doesn't she want me to know about him?"

"Because she thought you aren't old enough to understand. Grown-up people get such daft ideas sometimes. Even the nicest of them."

"Do you think I'm old enough?"

"Certainly, that's why I told them I would tell you."

"Then I *am* old enough," said Geraldine with perfect assurance. "Go on, tell me."

"He's your uncle," said Peter. "Your mother's brother, and he's a bit of a stinker."

"My mother's brother—why did she never mention him?"

"Because he is a bit of a stinker, silly."

"What sort of a stinker?"

"Well, it's a long story. But what's important is this. He and his mother and father, that's your grandparents, and your mother's sister Amelia, were all a bit queer. Not very nice. They were a bit screwy. Not mad at all, but screwy. Without any balance, and because your mother was not like them she married your father and got away and she kept away, and she kept you away. She believed, like Uncle Charles and Aunt Prudence, that environment means everything."

"Environment." The small voice thrust out the single word with some perplexity.

"How you live and with whom—not who your uncles and aunts were."

"Do you believe that?"

"What's it matter whether I do or not?"

"Because if you believe it, I believe it."

"Oh, Lord, I see. Well, as a matter of fact, I do."

"Then," said Geraldine with perfect satisfaction, "if you believe it and *they* do, it does not really matter what that queer man, my uncle," she corrected herself carefully, "did or not except as a story."

"Are you quite sure about that?"

"Of course."

"Well, then, I'll tell you the whole story."

This he proceeded to do, in brief, untidy phrases. He spoke about Theodora, omitting to mention that she and Alaric lived together for a while, presenting their marriage as a *fait accompli.* He went on to reveal the whole disintegration of the household, and he came to the climax upon the night when Amelia and Evalina died. "Then," he said, "things really broke up. After Theodora left the servants began to clear out. Jellaby, the butler—he's got an inn now not far from here—he was the last to go. You see, your Uncle Alaric wasn't interested in being very clean. He liked to have his meals at strange hours, too—and servants don't like that. Sometimes he wouldn't let them into his rooms for a long time, and then when he did let them in the rooms were so dirty that they refused to clean them. All this time the actress I told you about was living in the house. The servants didn't like her either, and nor did Mr. Witherspoon.

"As soon as all the legal side of things was cleared up he went. He took his children and their nurse with him, and he never came back. So that then there was only your Uncle Alaric and the actress in the house. Presently she left and someone else came instead. He didn't choose very nice women and the servants wouldn't wait on them. So when they had all gone, the women that your Uncle Alaric invited to stay with him brought strange, rather bad servants with them, and no one did very much work, and Uncle Alaric, who had spent most of his money, got very mean and wouldn't give them any money to buy things as they wore out. The house began to get shabby, and the garden. The gardeners left. The horses were sold. The carriages began to rot in the coachhouses. Now the coachhouses are beginning to rot, too. And always there were these strange women staying there, so, of course, no one else would go to the house and Uncle Alaric hadn't any proper friends. When he realized this he began to make some very unsuitable friends. Dishonest tradespeople in the town. Men who went too much to the taverns. *He* went to them, too, and altogether he made himself what is known as an outcast. But this is important, not an outcast for whom you should be sorry, because it was all through his own stupidity. Now I know you will say that one must be sorry for stupidity. But only for some kinds, and you will have to take my word for it for a few years that it was the wrong kind. He is dirty and vain, and selfish, and mean, and almost excessively stupid. Altogether he isn't very important. None of them are. And that was what worried Aunt Prudence. She thought that perhaps you might think, if she told you all about them, that they were important. She thought you might worry about having them for relations. That was why when I made that

faux pas about your uncle on the tennis court poor Uncle Charles tried to cover it up."

He stopped talking, dived into his pocket, and produced his pipe; and Geraldine did a surprising thing. She yawned. The sound was soft, drawn out, uninterested.

"I thought he might have been interesting," her voice was dry with disappointment, "but they all sound nasty—and rather dull. Come on, let's go back and see if we've caught any moths yet."

* * * * *

That was the end of Alaric Dingleby and his family, in so far as Geraldine was concerned, for some time to come. When she next saw him in Easterbridge she looked at him closely enough to see that he was indeed very dirty. She saw that the hand that clutched the long stick was unwashed, the nails long and uncared for. She saw that the eyes were furtive, a stubble of beard lay upon the chin. She said to Prudence, "He's not *my* idea of an uncle. I'd rather have Uncle Charles. I'm very glad we don't visit." *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

CHAPTER III

SHORTLY after Peter obtained his commission, Geraldine left for the school where she was to spend the next two years. When Peter returned again to Easterbridge, she was already gone. Again, when he went back on embarkation leave several months later, she was at school, and it was two years before they met once more.

The pattern of life for Prudence Lester and Charles Heatherstead was very little changed by the war. They were too old to take any very active part. True, Prudence inaugurated bandage-rolling afternoons at her house, when the ladies from the surrounding houses came to drink tea and exchange local gossip. She also drove the dog-cart every Wednesday afternoon to an adjoining village where a friend of hers had moved into the Dower House and given over the family seat to be a convalescent home for officers. Here, for the first few months, Prudence unpacked and listed linen, made up beds, prepared dispensaries, and helped arrange the store-rooms. After these preparations were over, she visited on Wednesdays to take produce from her own garden, and still later, she went twice a week, when the casualties began coming in, to hand out library books, serve teas, and write letters for the patients.

These things apart, the war made very little change for her. Charles Heatherstead managed, after a good deal of chicanery, to get himself appointed as a Special Constable. He also appointed himself librarian to the convalescent home, and for a time worried his friends to death in his ardent efforts to compile a good library. For the rest of his time, he wrote lengthy letters to his nephew, began a new biography, and grumbled a great deal about his own uselessness.

The tone of Peter's replies to his uncle's letters was supremely cheerful. He was having a wonderful time—his only worry was that it would in all probability be over by the time he finished his training. When the training came to an end the letters were wholly joyful—now at last he would see some service! And then the letters became very vague and non-committal, speaking more and more of trivialities. He was at last on active service.

While Peter was preparing to be a soldier, Geraldine was preparing to be a young lady. At the end of her first year she announced to her aunt—who continued quite unmoved—that she intended to be a V.A.D. at once. In spite of this declaration, Geraldine went back to school for her second year, and, soon after she had gone, Mrs. Lester prepared herself for a journey in the dog-cart into Easterbridge, where she intended visiting some of the dwellers in The Rock.

She set out on a clear, sunny afternoon and she drove through the glowing lanes between hedgerows which shone with all the bravery of their autumn colourings. The panoply of copper and crimson interlaced with gold spread over the encircling hills, unwinding into the valley where the tall trees bloomed in their last brilliant appearance of the year. The warm west wind ruffled the pony's coat. A covey of partridges arose from the newly turned furrow. Two magpies clattered out of a nearby spinney. The road unfolded emptily and the sound of the pony's hoofs was clear in the still, fresh air. The reins lay idly in her hands and she looked about her appreciatively. She loved this short drive into the town. Loved the unending variations of the scenes, the ever perceptible changes which intimacy made notable. A hare broke from the hedgerow and streaked across a field. Two rabbits bobbed away. A cloud came drifting over the valley, casting a vast birdlike shadow on the land below. "Better than people," thought Prudence Lester, "more satisfying."

The pony drew her nearer to the town. Presently the hedgerows gave place to fences. The fences merged into decorous iron railings. Prudence Lester put aside her reverie and turned the pony's head towards The Rock.

Charles Heatherstead was coming out of his house as the pony climbed the hill.

He waved to Mrs. Lester and stepped out into the road.

"Prudence, my dear," he said, "can you spare the time to go and see young Mrs. Soames? I have just heard that Charlie has had his left foot blown off. I think she would be glad to see you. Could you possibly drop in?"

"Our first personal casualty," said Prudence. "Poor Charlie! Of course I'll go. As a matter of fact, I am on my way down to The Rock. I have been trying to find an adequate excuse for poking my nose into other people's houses and I think at last I have one."

"Ingenuity, thy name is woman," murmured Charles. "What do you propose to do?"

"I hear this afternoon that the Wallaces have been canvassing their villagers for bandage-rolling volunteers. I thought if I approached The Rock people with the same plea it would get me in. And then I could

just take their names, and, if they agreed to assist, put their names down against some future date."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

She hesitated. "I don't think so, Charles," she said finally, "I shall probably get more out of them by myself. You know how those people *resent* callers at the best of times. Two of us might guarantee the doors being closed in our faces."

"Then, my dear, will you drink tea with me when you have finished?"

"With the greatest of pleasure," she said. "From what you have told me, I may importune your housekeeper for a bath! Oh, Charles, it's awful to think that people are living that way in our very midst."

"It is awful," he agreed, "and it's true, I'm afraid, of other towns than this. However, I won't detain you. I will wait tea for you, and trust that you are not too exhausted to appreciate it when you do return."

He stepped back again off the road, lifted his hat, and stood watching until the pony and cart disappeared to the left.

* * * * *

Mrs. Lester tethered the pony against a post at the entrance to The Rock, climbed down, and began her tour. She had a slip of paper in her hands. And now she glanced down at it to refresh her memory. "No 1," she read, "Burrage."

She knocked at the door, which was only partially closed, and presently a girl wrenched it fully open, revealing herself, the room, and two children scrabbling at her skirts. She held a baby in her arms; she was obviously well advanced in pregnancy.

"Well," she said, staring at the caller with dark, resentful eyes. "Well."

"Are you Mrs. Burrage?"

"Wot if I am?" There was neither respect nor resentment. Only the defensiveness of a creature wholly unbridled. "Leave off pullin' at my skirts," she said parenthetically to her two curious children. Their round, dirt-ringed eyes were fixed upon the "lidy."

"May I come in?" said Mrs. Lester undaunted.

"Yer can if yer like. It's not very clean. I bin poorly. Are you from the Parish?"

May stood aside, moving with the cumbersomeness of her condition.

"Oh, no." Prudence Lester stepped over the littered floor, trying to see as much as possible without appearing to do so. "I'm Mrs. Lester. I live in Lesser Melbury. I am looking for people to help me with voluntary sewing parties—and bandage rolling."

May shook her head. "Won't be no use askin' me," she said flatly, "I've got my nippers and wot with the 'ouse. I'm expectin' again, too," she added.

"Yes," said Mrs. Lester.

May cuffed at the nearer of the two bobbing heads that crowded to her knees. "Leave me be." Then she added, "Me dad's on the rileway and me brothers is gorne into the army—there's no one 'ere but me and

me dad. . . ." She was quite apathetic about herself and her condition. "It's no place to arst a lady," she then said.

"Does your landlord do any repairs for you?" Mrs. Lester, repressing a desire to dash out into the roadway and gulp in some gusts of fresh air, breathed in the stench manfully. "It needs repair."

"I bin 'ere all me life," said May, "no one's never done nothink. Nor never will neither, my dad says. They grind the noses of the poor, they do. Landlords." There was a sudden hopeful light in her eyes. She seemed to awaken to the impression that the "lidy," calling about sewing parties, might be good for a "touch."

The "lidy" was. She fumbled with the clasp of her bag. Murmured rather hurriedly, "I hope you will forgive my coming," and knew as she was speaking that she felt a certain dreadful guilt for driving on this woman's privacy, and forcing her to disclose her pitiful surroundings, when she herself was so warmly, securely guarded from such horrors. Prudence Lester was experiencing a sensation of total inadequacy as she stood in the dreadful little room and drew out a sovereign from her bag. She was almost bereft of her own quiet composure as she laid down the coin on the table, murmured something about "the children," and got herself out away to the other side of that chipped and battered door—into the street, where she could not see it any more, into the fresh, sweet-smelling air.

Grimly she knocked upon the door of the next house.

The names of the occupants—as her list told her—was Sedge. Mrs. Sedge, Percy Sedge, Polly Sedge. There was no mention of a Mr. Sedge here, either father, brother, or husband.

Mrs. Sedge answered the door. Her hair was tightly screwed into papers, until she looked as though she were extravagantly got up in a nightmare fashion of paper-wrapped champagne corks. The resemblance was remarkable, and as she spoke, nodding her head to emphasize her statements, the "corks" bobbed about as though her head were a dark pool, and the corks the floating markings of a subtly laid ground bait. In a sense, of course, they were.

Mrs. Sedge was cast in a different mould from May. First, she was twenty years older. Secondly, in a brief, regenerate spell during her distant youth, she had done kitchen-maid service at a nearby "place," where she had been bullied into a semblance of rather revolting servility to her betters. This half-remembered servility she hauled out from the recesses of her mind as she opened the door to the well-dressed, grey-haired caller; and she said at once, fingering the bobbing corks, "Won't you please, come in, ma'am; everything's in a shocking state, ma'am, but with illness in the 'ouse I'm sure you'll excuse me, ma'am. Was it a call from the vicar?"

Somehow, Mrs. Sedge's lingering throw-backs made her desperately anxious that at this time, of all times, the clergy should notice her, even though she had been falling from grace with monotonous regularity for over twenty years. As she would have phrased it, "It would have seemed easier, with a death 'anging over the 'ouse, to 'ave 'ad the clergy call."

But it was not from the clergy. Mrs. Lester explained her errand standing outside in the street.

"Well, I don't think as I rightly could say to come, ma'am," said Mrs. Sedge with doubt, "but if you would step in . . ." She waddled aside, and she almost drew Mrs. Lester inside by the urgency of her pose. She did not appear to mind at all that the filth of her living-room well matched the filth of the living-room next door.

"We 'ave illness in the 'ouse," she said lugubriously. A born masochist—enjoying the morbidity she was imposing upon herself. "My Poll," she added.

Prudence Lester, caught off her guard, heard the words "My Poll" and flung a despairing and doubtful glance at Mrs. Sedge's bedizened head. Then she recovered herself, and as the door closed behind her saw, in the dark little room, that "My Poll" referred to a wraith that lay on a truckle bed against the wall.

Polly Sedge was dying. The years of mud and the years of dripping, sweating damp had taken her life away. Now, propped up against a wedge of foul pillows, her bright, glittering eyes were all that was still vital in her wilting body—and her restless, transparent hands that tangled and plucked on the coverlet.

"It's the con-sumption," said Mrs. Sedge proudly. "Spits blood some-think crool, she does. Only a question of time, it is. There's nothink that can be done." She imparted this information as if the patient were deaf. She seemed to find nothing unsuitable in these statements before her.

Prudence Lester forgot the stench. She forgot the dirt. She forgot herself. In a few seconds she had passed from teeming, incestuous life to quivering, impatient death. It was here, crouching invisible above the bone-thin girl.

She stayed an hour with her. After she had spoken to her and sat with her for a few minutes, and the first cascade of illness-narrative had spent itself over Mrs. Sedge's loose mouth, Mrs. Lester said quietly, "You have a son, have you not?"

"That's right—my Perce. 'Ee's not—er—'ere at present—'ad a bit of bad luck, as you might say."

"Oh, dear, is he ill, too?"

"Well, not as you might say ill, but I don't say as 'ee won't be time 'ee gets out of the place where they've sent 'im. . . ."

Prudence Lester realized sharply that the missing Perce was undoubtedly in prison.

"Is there no one else here who could go out for me?"

"Well, no, ma'am. Leastwise, only me."

Mrs. Lester produced a pencil and a card from her bag, scribbled a few words upon it, gave it to the woman, and said, "Take this to the address I have written here. Wait for a parcel, and return here with it to me."

It was a long time afterwards before Mrs. Sedge realized that she had obeyed without question.

It was only when she had returned, and Mrs. Lester had unpacked the

parcel and issued instructions about its contents, promising to return on the following day to ensure that the food would be administered, that she left the house, and without any thought of continuing her visits that day, unhitched the pony and went back to have tea with Charles Heatherstead.

For once in her life, Mrs. Lester neglected the courtesies. She allowed the housekeeper to usher her into the small drawing-room, and before the door was closed said, without preface, "Charles, forgive me for sending that demand for food. Polly Sedge is dying of tuberculosis—the conditions in those houses are ghastly—her brother is in prison—her mother a slut—she's never had a chance, poor wretch—or, do you think I should drink my tea before I've washed?"

Charles Heatherstead held out the tea he had poured. "Drink it, my dear, and sit down. No, not through your veil. Prudence, I've never seen you so distressed!"

"I've never been so distressed. You told me conditions were bad. But I had no idea. I never imagined . . . something *must* be done."

"That," said her host wearily, "is what I have been saying for a great many years. It may please you to know that those houses have actually been condemned."

"Does that *mean* anything?"

"Technically, yes—actually, I'm afraid not. Is there nothing that can be done for Polly?"

"Oh, no. Even I could see that. We can only make her last few weeks, maybe even days, slightly easier for her. I am going back again this evening, but I did not tell the woman."

"You cannot go back this evening." He took her cup—gave her more tea.

"But that is ridiculous, I must."

"The current lodger will be in. It is not suitable."

Down went the tea-cup. Two very bright spots flared on her cheeks. Her eyes were sparkling with indignation. "Charles, I'm surprised at you. An ancient widow, of great many years, would you mind telling me what harm can come to me if I come into contact with an immoral labourer?"

There was a smile on his lips as he answered her. "No harm, my dear. I beg your pardon. I was speaking like a fool. Of course you can go back. Will you allow me to suggest that you leave the trap here to-night and let my carriage take you home?"

"No. Thank you very much for the suggestion, but I wish to return home immediately after tea. I want a number of things. Some bedding, some sheets, a few soft pillows. I shall come back in the carriage and it can wait for me."

He looked at her ruefully. "I always did say," he remarked at the ceiling, "that you were a very determined woman, Prudence. Now I add, thank God for it. You realize, of course, that I shall come with you!"

* * * * *

Three weeks later Polly died and Percy came "out" in time for the funeral. Mrs. Lester visited more of the houses and did what she could. But what she could do was comparatively little. How little she realized when, three months later, Percy Sedge received eighteen months for breaking and entry—and Mrs. Sedge became pregnant once more.

CHAPTER IV

GERALDINE FOOTE and Peter Heatherstead did not meet for two years. Soon after Geraldine's seventeenth birthday she came home from the school which she had so disliked, and was told that she need not return. Mrs. Lester made arrangements for the violin and piano lessons to continue, furnished a small room on the first floor as a private sitting-room for her niece, and settled down to guard her through the difficult period of girlhood.

Geraldine had grown swiftly. At seventeen she was a little above average height, excessively slender, and her movements were quick, gracious, and entirely composed. She seemed to have slipped from childhood to maturity without any of the awkward self-consciousness of the average English girlhood. She was, apparently, poised, very reserved, quickly hurt, and while outwardly concealing her vulnerability received the pain inwardly with great intensity.

She was dowered with a great awareness and a listening quality which let very little pass unobserved. At that time she was somewhat addicted to the writing of verse, the reading of the novels of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. Oddly enough she was, too, a keen fisherman, and in the absence of Peter she fished with "Uncle Charles."

One night, some few weeks after she had returned, she and Mrs. Lester sat together in the drawing-room after dinner, the elder woman busy with her *petit* point, the girl playing the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata with the naïve carefulness of immaturity. Suddenly she stopped playing, turned around on the wide music-stool, and looked at her aunt.

I want to talk to you," she said. Her voice was low—exceptionally clear. She spoke slowly, but her inflections gave the impression of speed.

"About what, my dear?"

"About Uncle Alaric." She hesitated a little over "Uncle Alaric."

"Very well," Prudence Lester spoke equably, "but what an unpleasant topic for a lovely night. What do you wish to say about your uncle?"

Geraldine moved from the music-stool and went slowly across to the windows. She wore a muslin dress, faintly reminiscent of the Empire period. She looked like an old print.

"Is he mad?" she asked.

"In a sense, yes—I suppose he is. But not a certifiable madness."

"Was anyone else in the family mad?"

With a heightened vibration, Prudence Lester picked her answers. After two years her anticipation of Geraldine's reactions was coming true. "Oh, I don't think so—just unpleasant."

"Are you quite sure, Aunt Prudence?"

"My dear, of course, I am not sure, medically. I am not a brain specialist. Speaking purely as an onlooker, I should say, certainly not. The Dinglebys were mainly unpleasant. Eccentric, if you like. But not more. Alaric is so very eccentric that it leads one to suppose that to a certain degree the balance of his mind has become disturbed."

"Has become disturbed," Geraldine repeated the words, "not *always was disturbed?*"

"Goodness gracious me, no! If he had had a sensible childhood, a few good, hard smackings, order, routine, and careful guidance, he might have been a passable citizen."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Of course I'm sure. But what is all this leading to? What have you in the back of your mind, child?"

"That's just the point." Geraldine's voice quickened. "I am not a child any more. Very soon I shall be a woman, and I want to know whether I have bad blood. Whether I am a normal woman if I have such peculiar relations."

Prudence Lester laid down her work. "Now, listen to me," she said firmly. Let us have an end to this once and for all. You have a perfectly normal blood strain. There's nothing wrong with you at all. Your mother was one of the sanest and most well-balanced women it has ever been my good fortune to meet. Your father was a gentle, kindly man. A bit of a dreamer. A bit of an idealist. You have quite a lot of him in your character. You have a very dreary uncle who is more of a fool than a rogue. Your Aunt Amelia was a soured spinster who suddenly got married, but too late to sweeten her, and your grandmother was a weak-willed woman who allowed herself to be browbeaten by a particularly ruthless man who loved money and power to the exclusion of everything else."

"I don't like money or power," said Geraldine. "Too much money makes one shut off. I read a quotation the other day, 'Wealth is a high wall round a quiet garden shutting out the cries of noisy people,' and I think that's right and sinful. One has no right to shut oneself off from the cries of noisy people. As for power, from what I have learned at school of history and great men, power brings misery and unhappiness, and I want to bring neither upon myself nor upon the world.

"Very laudable opinions," murmured Prudence, a little dazed by such youthful analysis. "Do you then want to do anything particular with your life? Young ladies generally wish to marry and have homes of their own."

Geraldine flushed. The quick, warm colour ran up under her fine skin. "I want to do these things, too," she admitted, "but I want to do other things besides."

Prudence resumed her embroidery and waited for further revelations. Presently they came.

"I want to learn to be a writer," said Geraldine, "and I do not know how to begin."

"Perhaps your Uncle Charles might be of assistance, since he *is* a writer. I should say, not having ever written anything except a great many letters and a number of lists which I invariably lose so they aren't any use at all, that to be a writer one would just have to write—and read. By reading the mind becomes stocked with a great many words on which the changes can be rung, and by writing, no matter how bad the initial efforts may be, one acquires a gradual skill."

The ideas appealed to the speaker and she continued. "The more you read the more you learn, and at the same time the more the possibility increases that you may unconsciously plagiarize through becoming overloaded with other writers' ideas and opinions."

"What does plagiarize mean?"

Prudence explained, and went on with her theme. "Writing is the only part of your training that I can recommend with any safety, I think. The more you write the easier it will become to put words on paper. The more you write the more dissatisfied you will become with what you write, if you have any talent at all. Then it must be a constructive labour." Suddenly an idea reached her. "Have you written anything, Geraldine?"

The dreadful cramps of shyness which are the labour pains of young writers attacked Geraldine, who assumed a furtive hunted expression and looked away as if she were most dreadfully ashamed of herself. "Yes," she admitted with terrible reluctance, "I have."

"Bless you, my love, how very delightful! What have you written?"

"Mostly poems," said Geraldine.

"Would you care to let me see them?"

"Oh, I don't know. Yes, if you like. Perhaps it would be better if I read them to you."

"You need not unless you wish," Prudence reminded her.

Immediately diffidence was overlaid with urgency. It became apparent that Geraldine must now display her work. "Oh, yes, I will," she cried, "they're in my sitting-room. I'll get them now." She moved hurriedly towards the door. Then she paused again. "Are you quite sure you want to hear them?"

"Quite sure, my love," said Prudence.

Geraldine left her musing upon this new development.

"So that," she thought, "was what Geraldine did in her newly furnished sitting-room. Wrote poems." Prudence hoped earnestly that the poems were not too bad, realizing anew how, in everything, this ward of hers made herself vulnerable to pain and disappointment.

"Here they are." Breathless, obviously having been running, Geraldine reappeared with her skirts flying and a handful of papers clutched in her hands. "Where shall I sit?"

"Sit where you will, but make yourself comfortable. It is impossible to read well if one is not comfortable." Wisely the older woman resumed her work, striving to invest the atmosphere with ease and calmness. Then the telephone rang, outside in the wide hall.

Geraldine laid down the papers she was endeavouring to sort. "Bother!" she exclaimed. "Who can that be?"

They both listened. They heard Bassett, the parlour-maid, answer the telephone, heard her approach the door, then the door opened. "You are wanted on the telephone, madam," said Bassett. "Mr. Heatherstead wishes to speak to you."

"It's all right, darling, I won't be a moment. Thank you, Bassett, I am just coming."

Mrs. Lester prepared to rise.

"Well, ask Uncle Charles if he will let me go and talk to him about being a writer," said Geraldine quickly, "will you, Aunt Prudence?"

"Yes, my dear, if you wish. Now, don't get so excited, Geraldine. Relax, child. Learn to relax. It is the secret of all poise."

Herself the epitome of poise, she went calmly from the room and closed the door behind her.

Geraldine put aside her poems, went back to the windows, and pressed her face against the cool, dark glass. Outside the night was wrapped protectively around the garden. She knelt on the cushions of the window-seat and tried to distinguish familiar patterns in the garden. Tried not to think about Uncle Charles and her writing, because she was so eager to think of nothing else.

She became absorbed in the web of her thoughts. They merged into the improbabilities of dreams. She ceased to remember the telephone call. She had escaped from the reality of the moment and was wandering blissfully in the future of her artistic triumphs. The sound of the door opening behind her was a sudden jolting to her reverie. She turned around slowly, and the other little sound of the door's closing synchronized with her movement.

Mrs. Lester looked very tired.

"Well," said Geraldine, "what did he say?"

Mrs. Lester looked at her strangely. "What did he say?" she repeated. It was obvious that the repetition suffered from her inattention.

"Yes—Aunt Prudence, what did he say about my writing?"

"Oh—of course." She sat down rather heavily. "Geraldine, I forgot to speak about your writing. Your Uncle Charles rang me . . . about another matter. He is telephoning again in the morning. I will speak to him about it then."

Disappointment flickered and faded from Geraldine's face. "In the morning," she repeated. "Well, you won't forget, will you?"

"No, dear, I will not forget again."

"Well, shall I begin again now? Shall I read my poems?

Mrs. Lester looked at her. There was a blank unrecognizing quality in the look, as if she did not see her. "Oh, yes, dear, of course. Pray do. Come back to your chair and begin now, begin straight away."

For once Geraldine's perceptions were slow. She did as she was asked. The sheaf of papers achieved a certain order, and after a few moments rather dubious staring at the written words, she cleared her throat and began reading.

She did not ask her aunt what it was that she had spoken about on the telephone. Prudence Lester did not tell her. Until she knew more, she

decided to keep Charles's message to herself. Until she knew how badly Peter was wounded . . . whether he would be coming home . . . or whether he would not be alive in a few days to come home.

* * * * *

Peter Heatherstead did come home. He was badly enough wounded to be sent to England from the Somme battlefield where he had been shot through the shoulder. The left lung had only been grazed. It was more than possible that in a few months' time he would be perfectly recovered. This was the news that Charles Heatherstead imparted a few days later; this was the news that Mrs. Lester gave to Geraldine.

It had not been easy news to give. When she had begun to speak she had been quite simply frightened at the intensity of Geraldine's expression.

"Peter," Mrs. Lester told her, "has been wounded, and is lucky enough to be on his way home."

She had not been prepared for the stark, stripped look which whitened Geraldine's face.

"Is he going to die?" she asked urgently, one hand against her face as if she had been struck.

"Don't be ridiculous, my love. Of course he is not going to die. He has been shot through the shoulder and his lung, his left lung, has been slightly grazed. That is all. We are very, very sorry, naturally, but selfish enough to be glad that for a while at least he is safe."

Geraldine gripped her arm with deep-dug fingers that pained her. "Are you sure? You are not just telling me that? Don't, please, Aunt Prudence. If he is going to die, please tell me at once. I don't want it made easy for me. I want to know."

It was then that Prudence Lester realized what she had suspected more than once; what she had told herself was romantic imagining; since the girl was no more than a child. *Geraldine was in love with Peter.* More, Geraldine *loved* Peter, with the same intensity she brought to all her affections and her dislikes.

She said, "Geraldine, don't be ridiculous," and the sharpness of her tone did more to calm the girl than the assurance of her words. "Peter is perfectly all right. He is wounded, and he is probably in pain, but he is not going to die, and you shouldn't think such dreadful things."

Whereupon Geraldine began to cry. The tears rolled down her face, silently. She sat down, rested her arms along the arms of the chair, and cried without any sound.

Prudence, who was sitting at her desk, picked up her pen and continued writing a letter. She waited until Geraldine said slowly, "I'm only crying because I'm glad. Don't be angry with me, Aunt Prudence. I'm so very glad."

"Then, perhaps, my love," Mrs. Lester made her voice brisk, "you will discuss with me the possibility of our going to see Peter as soon as the authorities permit us."

This was the anodyne. The shadows dispersed with the magic of youth. The tears still misted her face and she smiled, once more a schoolgirl.

"When can we go, Aunt? Tell me, when can we go? Is Uncle Charles coming with us? Will we really be able to see him? . . ."

"I wonder how Peter feels about Geraldine," thought Prudence when she had finally restored order.

* * * * *

That unspoken question was answered by Peter Heatherstead himself, six months later, on a clear, cold day in the January of 1917, a few weeks before Geraldine's eighteenth birthday. He came into the hall of Prudence Lester's house shaking the snow from his coat, and brushing it from his dark head. In a few weeks he would be returning to France. His wounds were healed. His sick leave was nearly over. The medical board had pronounced him once more fit for active service, and he had just returned, from a morning's lugeing in the snow, with the express intention of interviewing Mrs. Lester privately.

She came out from the morning-room at the sound of his voice, saw him strip off his coat, and exclaimed with some surprise, "Well, Peter, I thought you were lugeing with Geraldine. Why have you not brought her home with you?"

Peter turned. "I wanted to have a few words with you alone, Aunt Prudence," he said.

She stood in the hall and looked at him. He made her feel old. One of the prerogatives of youth. If the youthful are fundamentally valuable they should oppress the nature with the sense of their own lost exhilaration. If, instead, they irritate, or merely bore, then they are generally more laden with the silliness of inexperience rather than the charm of courageous illusions. Peter Heatherstead made Prudence Lester feel old and rather trivial. Made her feel sentimental for her own lost feminity, wistful of his charm, and envious of his assurance and enthusiasm. At once she wanted him for her own son, and wished she had had such a lover.

She said to him, "Well, if you want to see me alone, have the goodness to come out of this cold hall. My old bones are cringing, and there's an excellent fire in the library."

She turned towards the library and Peter followed her obediently. "I'm hot," he said. "Geraldine likes going down so much that I have had to lug that luge up a million times. I left her trying to break her neck and thoroughly enjoying it."

Under the lightness of his voice there was a thread of nervousness. He was talking to hide it. He sat down in front of the blazing fire. He got up and began walking about the room. He started to speak, said, "Look here, Aunt Prudence . . ." and broke off again to run his hands distractedly over his hair.

"For mercy's sake, Peter, stop behaving like a lunatic," said Prudence. "If you have done something naughty and want to confess, then confess and get it over. Or do you want to borrow some money?"

"Oh, no . . . no, it's nothing like that . . . it's . . . well . . ." He marched up and down again and came to an abrupt halt before her. "I

want to marry Geraldine," he said. "Now it's out! No, please don't say anything for a minute. Let me finish first. Geraldine isn't an ordinary person. She's something special. A strange kid, really. All mixed up inside. At least, she is with most people. I understand her. I always have done. Oh, I didn't know it before I got this Blighty. Had no idea of it. She was just Geraldine: a nice kid, and a jolly good fisherman. I liked being with her. Felt comfortable. There aren't many people about that one feels comfortable with. Don't know anyone else, in fact, except you and Uncle Charles, and a bloke I met in France, a school-teacher. Rum fellow he is. Come to that, I don't feel very comfortable with you this morning. I want to write after this war. Geraldine wants to write. As you know, I have a little money. I get it when I'm twenty-five. In the meantime Uncle Charles is trustee, and I could *keep* Geraldine. I don't think I could ever marry anyone else, and Geraldine wants to marry me. I asked her this morning. We got in a mess on the luge and I had to pull her out of the snow. It was when she toppled off. I thought she was hurt. That was when I found out. I asked her straightaway."

"What . . . what did she say?" Mrs. Lester asked faintly.

"Oh, she said, 'Of course'—just like that."

"I see—she said, 'Of course'—just like that."

"Yes. I know she's very young. But, you know, you said yourself that young marriages were a good thing."

"Did I? I don't remember."

"Well, you did. I swear you did. You won't make us wait until she is twenty-one, will you, Aunt Prudence?"

Prudence Lester looked at him for a long time. She knew that it was impossible for her to tell him what her one great stumbling-block was to giving her consent. That he might be killed. He seemed so intensely, utterly alive. For once she was finding the weight of guardianship oppressive. "Does your Uncle Charles know anything of this?" she asked.

"No, not yet. I came straight to you first."

"Thank you, Peter." She put out her hand and touched his gently. "Thank you, very much. Now, my dear, will you do something else for me?"

"Yes, of course. If I can. Is it about Geraldine?"

"No, not altogether. I want you to go straight back to your Uncle Charles. I want you to ask him to dine with me this evening. I want you to stay away until after dinner. And stay away from Geraldine until Uncle Charles and I have talked this over. Then, say, about nine o'clock this evening you can come back, and we will tell you what our answer will be."

"Don't you want me to tell Uncle Charles?"

"Of course, my dear, by all means tell him, but let us two old people have a little while in peace together before we give you an answer."

"It's a devil of a long time till nine o'clock to-night," said Peter reflectively.

"Let me remind you of one very important factor," said Mrs. Lester, rising. "Neither your Uncle Charles nor I are yours or Geraldine's parents.

We are only your guardians. Our duty is an extra duty because we have no parental tie to guide us to our decisions. So have patience with us and do not hurry us too much. Now, go along back, my dear, and leave me alone for a little while."

To her astonishment he bent and kissed her. "All right, Aunt Prudence," he said, very quietly like a small boy, "our fate is in your hands. Tell Geraldine, won't you?"

In a moment he was gone and the room seemed extraordinarily empty by his going.

* * * * *

Geraldine rushed into the house a few minutes after Peter's departure. She ran through the hall calling, "Aunt Prudence, Aunt Prudence, where are you?" and stopped short, just inside the library, as the answering voice summoned her.

Her cheeks were rosy; her eyes sparkled; the snow clung like an aura to her flying hair. "Have you seen Peter?" Her voice was breathless. "Have you seen him?"

"Yes, my dear," said Prudence, "I have seen him."

Geraldine flung herself down beside her. She buried her head in her aunt's skirts and, even muffled as it was, her voice held a ring of exultation. "He's asked me to marry him. Isn't it wonderful? Of course, I've always loved him. Ever since the first day I ever saw him. But I never thought, never imagined . . . oh, I'm so happy." She lifted her glowing face. "Why don't you say something?"

"I was listening to you. Always, Geraldine?"

"Yes. When I was a little girl I used to pretend I was grown-up and he would marry me. I never dreamed it would happen."

"I thought two years ago that you were in love with him." She touched the girl's hair lightly with her veined hands. "But do you know what marriage means? Geraldine, you are so young. You are both so young. . . . And then . . . this war!"

She said, with tremendous assurance, "If we get married straightaway Peter won't get hurt any more. I know that."

There was no answer that Prudence could make to that. Instead, she said, more as if she were thinking aloud than addressing the girl, "I always wanted you two to marry, but not yet."

Geraldine lifted her head. "But not yet, Aunt Prudence?"

"But not yet, my dear. I am over-anxious perhaps in my desire to protect you from what might be a tragic experience."

"Peter will be all right," Geraldine repeated; "and, anyway, if . . . if anything happened to him, wouldn't I feel much worse if we hadn't been married than if we had?"

"You cannot tell, my darling, how you would feel."

Geraldine rose impatiently. "All this talk of death!" she exclaimed. "It has no place in things for us. I'm sure of that. Oh, please, Aunt Prudence, say yes. Don't make us wait. If only for your own reason, that it might make it too late."

Mrs. Lester told her what she had said to Peter. "When I have heard what Uncle Charles has to say I will answer both you children." There was an unshakable finality in her voice now. "So no matter how urgent your cause may seem, the pair of you will have to contain yourselves in patience until to-night."

* * * * *

Geraldine was up in her own room when Charles Heatherstead arrived. Mrs. Lester waited for him alone in the drawing-room, sitting by the fire, thinking back in random recollection over the years, letting unrelated fragments of past scenes and conversations drift across her mind. When the door opened, Bassett said, "Mr. Heatherstead, madam," and shut them in together.

Charles Heatherstead walked towards the fire and stretched out his hands; for some reason he was uncomfortable. He invested the atmosphere with his unease as he warmed his hands. Prudence Lester was immediately aware of it. Her "Well, Charles," was unintentionally dry. His discomfort reached her and jarred the calmness she had imposed upon herself throughout this day of constant thought and heart-searching.

"Well, Prudence," he said.

This, she thought, is getting neither of us anywhere. "Peter, has told you?"

"Oh, yes. He came in like a draught just before luncheon and made his announcement as if it were an ultimatum. He was ardent and fierce, appealing and belligerent. He was, in fact, any young lover who is unsure of his cause."

"Are we unsure of the cause?"

"I am unsure of everything this evening, Prudence. Primarily because I have a personal and highly important problem to resolve in addition to the question of this marriage."

"I see. Will you raise your problem first?"

"No, last, my dear, if you will permit me. Let us talk about the children."

She sighed. "That is surely the crux of the whole matter. That they *are* still children."

"I wonder," he debated. "Can one dismiss a young man of nearly twenty-four as a child when he has already been wounded in battle?"

"Geraldine has not been wounded in battle." She side-stepped the question.

"Quite! But, you know, I am not entirely satisfied that she is a child either."

"But she is terribly young."

"Admittedly, in many ways she is, but in many ways she is exceptionally mature."

Mrs. Lester leant forward. "Are you telling me that you do not oppose them?"

"I think," he picked his words delicately, "I am first telling you that this marriage has always been my dearest wish."

"And mine," she said softly.

"Further to that, I am still undecided that we are intended to debar early experience from the young because we know that experience may be fraught with danger."

"Are you allowing nothing for the wisdom of experience?"

"A great deal, my dear. I am allowing tolerance and the ability to stand aside, but not the ability to interfere."

"Oh, ability surely? But as to the advisability, I have told you, I am unsure. War marriages are always dangerous," she said, harking back to her fears.

"This can hardly be called a war marriage in the accepted sense of the term. Geraldine and Peter have known each other for years; they have already built for themselves the most valuable essential of friendship. For, you know, in my opinion that *is* the cornerstone of marriage. No matter how much two people may be in love, they have no certainty of lasting happiness if they do not like each other as deeply as they love."

Mrs. Lester said rather desperately, "All this theorizing, Charles! Geraldine and Peter are wildly in love. That for the moment impairs their vision for anything else. They do not *know* at the moment that they do like each other."

"No," he agreed, "but we know. That is where we come in, as judges."

"There is another point," she mused; "Geraldine's complexes. She is an intricate person, inasmuch as she *involves* herself in her soul-searching. Marriage might put an end to all that."

"A nursery," he grunted, "is a fine leveller of women."

"And they both want to write." Unconsciously the two began to reassure one another, enumerating the advantages. They were unaware that the decision had already been made. Charles Heatherstead accepted the fact first.

"We are not going to stand in their way, Prudence, are we?" he said.

There was a pause.

"No, Charles," she answered him, "I do not think that we are. Even if we expose ourselves to censorious comment from the entire county. We will let them get married."

They were silent for so long that the small sounds from the household around them began to creep into the room.

"That is Bassett going to ring the gong," Prudence Lester said suddenly.

"Yes, and I have not finished what I came here to say!"

"Have you not, Charles." Her fine grey eyes glinted with a peculiar light. "What else have you to say?"

She watched him stand up, saw him turn his back to the fire, put his hands behind him, saw his fine-lined mouth contract. Then he told her what else it was that he had to say to her.

* * * * *

Dinner was a silent meal. Neither of them ate much. Bassett made several very gloomy pronouncements in the kitchen, added that her corns had been troubling her, sure augury of trouble, and declared that "some-

thing was in the wind." The household telegraphy that functions between the employers and the employees was working with customary briskness, and all were aware of tension. The prognostications were a little wild below stairs.

Up above, in her small sitting-room, denying herself the comfort of dinner, Geraldine sat like a small animal, coiled on the window-seat waiting for the decision. She listened to the dinner-gong, glanced at the small clock on her mantelpiece, and deducted the time which remained before Peter's arrival. Half an hour later she heard the double doors of the dining-room open and the sounds of footsteps on the parquet. Dinner, she knew, was now over. She remained immovable upon the window-seat.

In the drawing-room, Mrs. Lester was saying to Charles Heatherstead, "I hope, my dear Charles, that we are not making ourselves ridiculous."

Then Peter arrived, smiled upon Bassett who thought him "wonderful," asked where Geraldine was to be found, and it being stated said, "All right, Bassett, don't bother to announce me; I am expected anyway. I will go up to Miss Geraldine's room and bring her down."

He ran up the stairs and Bassett ran down to give the latest bulletin to cook.

They went into the drawing-room together. They both looked surprised to find Mrs. Lester at work at her desk and Mr. Heatherstead reading an evening paper. Somehow the intimate calm of the scene disturbed their youthful sense of drama.

"Well?" said Geraldine.

Mrs. Lester turned and Charles Heatherstead peered out over the rim of the paper.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "my future niece. Well, young woman, what about giving me a kiss. Better go and ask your aunt's permission and let us at least have some semblance of formality to the proceedings."

CHAPTER V

In the third year of the first World War there was nothing particularly remarkable in the external appearance of the house "Laurelston." It was certainly shabby. It was also ugly. But there were other ugly, shabby houses in the vicinity, and although the deep, thick hedge of laurel and fir which shielded the garden from the road had run up through the years without benefit of clipping, it detracted from, rather than increased, the general air of decay.

There were weeds in plenty along the carriage drive. The rose garden had a wild, neglected appearance, and it was obvious that for many years no carriage wheels had rolled out from the stables, where the paint-blistered doors were tightly closed, and a litter of wind-brushed leaves were banked against them. Nevertheless, the house was not derelict. There were signs of life behind the dirty windows. Curtains looped and hung down from the high, invisible cornices. Blind cords dangled across the glass, but there were no open windows anywhere to be seen.

Inside the house, coiled like a rather dirty larvæ inside the rather revolting chrysalis of his seedy dressing-gown, Alaric Dingleby sat in his studio eating his breakfast. Although daylight streamed through the windows, the gas was burning, and in a far corner a monstrous wooden idol, with an out-jutting lower lip, belched incense upon the room.

The room had undergone surprisingly few changes in the past thirteen years. True there were many more objects crowded tightly upon one another, but all the old objects, purchased in that first wild dreadful year of Alaric's inheritance, remained. True, that not one of them occupied its original place, but it was also true that the room taken as a whole looked, regretfully, very much the same. The crimson curtains shrouded the windows. The bobbles had moulted in places and the drapes were drunkenly askew. The crimson day-bed, now spread with a Spanish shawl, with half the fringe missing, and a moth-eaten leopard skin, still remained in pretty constant use, judging from the appearance of the spring! The lacquer cabinets were there also. And the vast desk, the several easels, the numerous canvases in various stages of imperfection. All the drawers of all the cabinets were partially open. Some were merely ajar, some had their handles missing, some were fully open, disclosing a nightmare assortment of drawing apparatus, old photographs, newspaper clippings, unanswered letters, crumpled linen, underwear, neckties, gloves, socks and tools. There were chisels, small fretsaws, rolls of coloured paper, innumerable pots and tubes of paint, paint-brushes, a palette which had been called into service as an ashtray, paper bags of congealing sweets, loops of coloured beads, artificial flower calyx, bundles of flower-petals, coils of wire, glue and gum, and plasticine. There was a crimson satin armchair, a horsehair sofa, a green damask chair with walnut frame, and two deal chairs partially painted emerald-green. There were tables in profusion of every known wood, and unmatching bookshelves, piled one upon the other like perilous towers of Pisa, all for ever in danger of toppling over their heterogeneous burdens, all for ever in imminent peril of collapse. Everything was filmed with a fine deposit of dust and in the centre of the room a giant trestle table bore the main burden of litter. At one end stood a spirit lamp, a kettle, two saucepans, and some dirty china. Nearby were half-empty pots of jam, a pot of paste with a down of mould encrusted upon it, and some butter on a copy of the *Easterbridge Gazette*. Farther down was a box of Poudre de Riz, some sticks of greasepaint, a Venetian mirror of great beauty, and a gilt and satin box very much frayed and tarnished. Still farther down lay a hat, a gold-mesh handbag, some soiled white gloves, and a pair of Morocco slippers. Among everything else there were inkstands, bottles of patent medicines, a hairbrush matted with hair-oil and hairs, and a copious dropping of hairpins.

Alaric lay back in a rocking-chair at the opposite end of the table to the kettle. He wore his fez, which he declared kept his head warm and saved him many colds, a tattered brocade dressing-gown, and since the fronts were rather negligently swathed, his lean shanks protruded. He had a dirty silver tray before him, a newspaper upon his knees, and he was endeavouring to eat and read at the same time. This resulted in the

greater proportion of food spilling down his front. When this happened he brushed it off or rubbed it in, according to the consistency. Some crumbs collected upon his chin and cheeks, which were grey with beard-stubble. The effect was peculiar, and made him look as though he were cobwebbed.

Supremely unconscious of the room, or Alaric, his companion ate her breakfast off another tray upon the opposite side of the table and read a paper-backed novel with complete absorption. She was Alaric's latest acquisition, quondam mistress of "Laurelston"; ex-dancer, run to fat. She was not very fat, she was not very old, but she was sufficient of both to make dancing an impossibility, so, like many before her, she took to the still older profession. Her touched-up hair was now also tied up under a beribboned boudoir cap, which ill-consorted with the curlers which peeked out under the pink ribbons and lace. She had a coarse complexion, pitted from greasepaint (cosmetic skin it is called "in the business"), a pair of still rather fine eyes and splendid, slightly dropped bosom. She wore a peignoir, her corsets loosely laced, and a pair of satin slippers.

Impossible though it appeared, there was nevertheless a certain aura of gutter comfort about the pair. They were sufficiently shoddy, and silly, and insensitive to be blissfully unaware of the mess in which they sat. It was not—for them. It was warm, and the nice smell of incense was strong enough to stifle other less nice smells. Everything was to hand—for a little preliminary rootling—since everything was spilled and in one direction or another and visible to the naked eye. . . . On the previous night they had had a generous libation of liquor apiece, after which they saw precious little of anything at all. By a measure of unspoken agreement, neither made any demur about the other's appearance when *"au négligé"*, excepting, of course, during a shenanegan, when every known form of abuse went back and forth. Each knew that, later in the day, chins would be scraped and faces painted, boots laced, and corsets, hats, and coats assumed, in order that the real business of the day . . . *toping* . . . might go forward.

That was what it had come to. Alaric, still needing women, but unable even to command the market from which he had made his earlier purchases, was forced to inveigle to his house those women for whom the gin bottle and not the alcove possessed the greater appeal. He himself discovered that under wine's kindly benison forty has a way of looking a great deal more like twenty, so he and his light ladies drank. Thereafter they fought, and very occasionally indulged in what for decency's sake is sometimes called dalliance. This way of life had told on Alaric. He was intensely thin. He had small loose pouches of unfilled skin which hung like the folds of a well-draped curtain under each light blue eye. His hair and eyebrows were streaked with grey. His nails had a peculiar blue-grey tinge, as had the skin on the backs of his hands, which were beginning to mottle.

The newspaper slid to the floor as he stood up. He crossed to his desk sat down, and began writing. The woman reached for the paper and straightened out its creases. "Nothing in that rotten rag," she said in a

rather hoarse voice, throwing it down on top of her tray; then she yawned, stretched, and added, "Think I'll see about getting dressed."

Alaric took no notice of her whatsoever.

As she flung down the paper and stood stretching, she glanced down and saw that a photograph was centred upon the front page. She bent and looked at it more closely.

"Allie, didn't you say you had some relations called Foote?" she said.

Alaric looked up. "Yes, my sister Augusta married a Foote."

"Well, there's one here getting married."

"Give me the paper."

"All right. No need to snap. Here you are."

She handed it across. He screwed in his monocle and read. "So that's who it was," he said aloud.

"That who who was? What are you talking about?"

"Remember I told you I saw two women in a dog-cart. I wondered who they were?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well," he stabbed at the picture, "that's my niece."

"What does it say, I didn't read."

"It says"—his voice was angry—"she's marrying someone called Heatherstead. Come to think of it, I know a Heatherstead, an old boy, some dry-as-dust scribbler." His voice tailed off as he returned to the caption. "It's his nephew," he exclaimed.

"Well, I must say they treat you rather shabbily! Why haven't they been to see you?"

Alaric thought about that for a while, the angry creases deepening around his mouth. Quickly his mind rejected the unwelcome thought that they did not wish to see him, or claim any knowledge of him. He knew that his sister was dead. Upon this knowledge he swiftly built a reason which was more palatable. "Probably the girl doesn't know. Indeed, she can't be very old, about eighteen. When Ma died she was only about four or five. I expect she was staying near here with friends, and met this Heatherstead. I shall call."

"I shouldn't put your nose in where you may not be wanted," advised the woman, quick to read the inferences he would not see.

Her advice angered him still further. "You mind your own business. A lot you know about it. Of course, I shall go . . . might send them a wedding present. . . ." His eyes roved about the room, dwelt upon the now tarnished gilt lions, roved to a clutter of yellowed ivory figures . . . passed on to some dirty china ornaments. "Find her one of the family heirlooms," he decided. "Go to the wedding. . . ."

"If you ask me, I think you're making a mistake."

He rounded on her instantly. "Who asked you?" he snarled. "I told you once to mind your own business."

The beginning of a promising row flared up between them. It was stalled by the sound of knocking upon the door.

"Can I come in?" demanded a rusty voice—the voice of the woman

who, with her husband, led a derelict existence in the servants' quarters and "did" for "Laureston" and its occupants in her own cursory manner.

"Oh, go to hell," roared Alaric.

"All right," shouted the rusty voice, in no way distressed, "I'll come back later."

They heard her carpet slippered feet shuffling down the passage. Alaric got up and went out of the room.

When he had gone the woman picked up the paper once more and read the caption. Then she glanced at the date. The paper was already a week old. The wedding would be celebrated on the following day.

* * * * *

Alaric wandered through the house in his scandalous garments appraising his possessions. Already he was embarking upon a glamorous cruise of fancy regarding this niece of his, which excluded all other thought. He would, he decided, select some suitable object from the house, and take it with him to the address, given in the *Easterbridge Gazette,* in the village of Lesser Mellbury. He would give it to his niece, find out what had happened to her after her mother's death, and probably have a very good time himself. Conveniently, his memory failed him in respect of his own delinquencies. Because he did not wish to remember the past, he forgot it. It caused him no trouble, and now, playing him traitor once again, it was slumbering to his undoing. This time it would be better if he had remembered.

He came down the main staircase and leaning over the banisters surveyed the hall.

The gilt horses, still prancing outwards upon their eternally arrested course, were chipped, bent, and battered. The clock had been silent for many years, and the wallpaper unfurling from the damp walls was hanging like a banner of decay over the bare patches on the walls from where the pictures had been removed and sold.

Alaric had never made much money out of his dreaming maidens, and his needs had always outstripped his purse, so that from time to time he was forced to plunder the house to provide himself with ready cash. No, there was nothing in the hall that was a suitable wedding present.

He went into the drawing-room. The shutters were closed. He groped for matches and lit the gas. It hissed away over his head and drove sombre shadows into the darker recesses. He looked doubtfully at a dreadful pair of imitation cloisonné vases, picked up a mother-of-pearl box with two sickly mermaids painted upon the lid, frowned over the few remaining pictures, and espying a gilt-cornered, velvet-bound album on a stool, picked it up, sat himself down, and began turning the pages. When the coldness of the room oppressed him, he threw the album on the floor and went out leaving the gas burning and the door open. He was still incapable of closing a door behind him.

The tour continued. Through the shrouded dining-room into the morning-room, where he debated for some time over a small escritoire.

However, he rejected this, because it was too heavy for him to carry, and the picture he had of himself entering the room where his niece would receive him was of a benevolent uncle carrying a wedding gift. The desk was far too cumbersome!

He began twitching open the drawers. The desk had once been used by Lady Dingleby. There were still some yellowed papers in the pigeonholes. One of the drawers contained a small box. This he opened and found inside a ring and two brooches. They were not flashy enough. "Rosie, hi, Rosie, here's something for you!" he called, going to the doorway. When she came to the stair-head he tossed them up to her one by one.

He then went through the remainder of the silver in the silver cupboard. These he could not bring himself to give away. Eventually, after about an hour, he went back to the drawing-room, picked up the vases, and with one tucked under each arm went back upstairs again to the studio. They were the vases he had purchased soon after his father's death.

The gift of the brooches and the ring made Rosie feel uncomfortable. She watched Alaric furtively for some sign of his going out. She meandered back into the studio and went back to her paper-backed novel. Alaric began to sketch. There was no sign that he intended going out. All day she watched him, and when about five o'clock he declared that he would dress, she knew that he would not be visiting his niece that day. Still, she did not know whether to tell him what she knew, or whether to keep silent. She had a distinct feeling that it would be better for him if he did not go . . . and yet she was afraid.

* * * * *

The marriage of Geraldine and Peter was, to them, an incidental affair, necessary according to the conventions in order that they might be alone together with propriety. To neither of them did the marriage ceremony represent anything of particular significance. People *got* married in order to spend their lives together; in order to have families and homes, because they especially liked each other. The actual business of *being married* was a matter of relations—and peacocking, unwanted gifts, and a lot of totally unnecessary dressing-up. This view they shared with perfect unity when, the night before the "peacocking," they went off together to the branch over the stream where they had sat two years previously when Peter told Geraldine about her Uncle Alaric.

Here they did a considerable amount of reminiscing. Geraldine rather disturbed her future husband by stating that in her opinion fourteen children would be a nice number, and the pair nearly fell into the pool as the result of a dispute. They wrangled together in amicable disagreement, they romanced together with simple directness, and they scurried back across the lawn with guilty haste—to be reprimanded by both Mrs. Lester and Mr. Heatherstead.

"Well," Peter remarked defensively when he been sufficiently admonished, "I don't know, come to that, sir, that it's *comme il faut* for you and Aunt Prudence to be alone together."

Prudence Lester choked and turned away with heaving shoulders. "Answer that one, Charles, if you can," she said, her voice unsteady with laughter.

"I think I can." Charles Heatherstead closed the french windows and marched purposefully down the room. "It's perfectly *de rigueur* for your Aunt Prudence and I to be alone together at any hour because she happens to be my wife. We intended telling you this evening anyway, but I did not know that you would be so obliging as to give me a direct lead to the conversation."

Geraldine flopped on to a convenient sofa. "Why didn't you tell us?" she stammered.

"When did you do it, sir?" asked Peter.

"Oh, several days ago. We thought it might be a good idea, since we had come to this decision on the night you got engaged to Geraldine, if I were out of my house in time to make a wedding present of it to you."

Whereupon Geraldine unaccountably burst into tears and would not at first be comforted.

"What on earth is the matter, my love?" demanded Mrs. Lester, sitting down beside the weeping girl and proffering handkerchiefs liberally.

The words finally emerged, "Force you and Uncle Charles to marry . . ."

"Supposing," said Mrs. Lester, "you stop weeping long enough to give me an opportunity of replying."

Geraldine raised a tear-drenched face. "Driven Uncle Charles out of his house . . ." she sniffed. "Couldn't want to go at his age!"

Peter shouted with mirth. "Don't be so cruel, Geraldine," he said, gathering up his despondent bride. "Uncle Charles has been spoiling for the opportunity for years of proposing to Aunt Prudence and he hasn't had the pluck. We forced his hand and he's as pleased as Punch."

"I might have worded it a little more delicately myself," murmured Charles, "but your point is well made nevertheless."

"Is it true?" Geraldine looked at them all rather doubtfully. "You're not just" . . . sniff . . . "getting out to make room" . . . sniff . . . "sacrificing the peace and quietness of your own home . . ."

By the time that the distressed girl had been fully reassured, Bassett came in with the tea-tray, and Charles Heatherstead bade his wife good night and took his nephew home.

"A fine thing," said Peter, as they walked down the drive towards the stables, "you having to leave your own house to come back with me!"

"I shall be here to-morrow," Charles Heatherstead pointed out peacefully. "Your aunt and I have managed tolerably well for a great many years without sleeping under the same roof, so I do not think one more night will cause us undue hardship."

"I should loathe it if it was me."

Mr. Heatherstead's feet went steadily across the cobblestones of the stable yard. "So should I," he agreed, "if I were twenty-three."

* * * * *

It was not until Bassett awoke her as usual with a cup of tea and two wafer slices of bread and butter that Geraldine realized there was something more than just going to live with a man you loved—in this marriage business. She sat upon one elbow, and inquired as to the weather, as Bassett drew back the curtains and let up the blinds with their familiar roll and rattle.

"A clear day and a cloudless sky, Miss," said Bassett like a night watchman. "A lovely day for wedding."

"Isn't there a saying about that?" said Geraldine, sipping her tea.

"Oh, yes, Miss, 'Happy is the bride on whom the sun shines.' I'm sure, miss, I hope you will be happy."

"Thank you very much, Bassett. Don't you worry about me, I'm sure I shall be happy."

"Mr. Peter is a wonderful man," said Bassett lusciously.

"Yes, he is nice, isn't he?"

Regretfully, Bassett left her. She would have preferred to prolong such a conversation indefinitely, meandering through her own opinions of Mr. Peter, blended with bits and pieces about her young man.

Geraldine scrambled in an undignified manner down to the foot of the bed and peered out at the day. It *was* fine. The sky was clear and a running wind was chasing some fluffy remnants over the rim of the horizon. She knelt against the bed-rail and thought about herself. Suddenly, in the midst of all her pleasure, a dreadful thought intruded. She caught a glimpse of herself in the dressing-table mirror. She saw her own pale face, wide eyes, and long, fair plaits, and she thought that she looked quite dreadfully uninteresting. "Peter can't love me," she decided in that instant, "he is only marrying me for pity. That's it, he's sorry for me. He couldn't love me. Poor Peter."

With this thought she got off the bed and approached the dressing-table more closely. Many persons of great sensitivity are prone to translate love for pity, and she was no exception. For a little while an orgy of renunciation engulfed her, and then the healthful sound of the breakfast gong rolling through the house sent her scrambling into her clothes at a great rate.

Later, when she stood waiting in her wedding dress for Uncle Charles to take her to the church, she saw herself again in the mirror, with the froth of lace around her shoulders, and she forgot about Peter needing to pity her.

She was thinking of nothing in the world any more than the coming ordeal. Wondering how in the world she was to acquit herself admirably before all those people. She was finding this part of being married almost unbearably unpleasant. It was quite impossible for her to impart any of this to her companion. Had she been able to do so more than half of her

fears would have dispersed by the sharing and the resultant comfort. From this luxury, her temperament debarred her, and so, with sickly anticipation, feeling like a miscreant about to be arraigned before her judges, she went down the stairs clutching Charles's arm.

The house was strangely silent. To her right, the double doors of the dining-room revealed the glitter and sheen of the wedding breakfast. The white snow-castle of the pyramided cake, the silver shimmer of the dishes, and the formalized motley of the coloured foodstuffs. To her left, through the opened drawing-room doors, the posturing elegance of flowers and plants was framed by the pale green walls. The empty waiting chairs, the drifting perfume from the heavy-headed blossoms . . . all for her, all in her honour, all for the bride.

Even the servants were at the church, primed with instructions to leave by a side door and hurry back across the gardens when the bride went into the vestry.

With awful resignation, Geraldine entered the waiting carriage. The gentle mind whipped at the white ribbons, rustled the leaves in the familiar shrubbery, exiled her from her normal memories of this most friendly place, imposed upon her an alien sense—as if she were immolated upon some sacrificial altar, as though she were a ceremonial victim. She gripped her fingers closely together and pressed them under her young breasts, as though to impede a pain.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, y'know," said Charles Heatherstead rather helplessly. "All friends there, y'know. Everyone wishing you well."

She gave him a sick, strained smile. "Of course, Uncle Charles, I'm all right."

The words had a special witchcraft. As the carriage drew up before the lich-gate, they eddied around her. *"I am all right."* Of course, she was all right. In that small, friendly church there were only friends, as Uncle Charles had said; and Aunt Prudence and Peter. . . .

She went up the path almost with pleasure. The roll and quiver of the organ was a welcome not a warning—now. She wished in a quick, last flurry of thoughts that she could remember some specially moving words to commemorate the moment for ever in her mind . . . but there was nothing there . . . only the wish, and the thought of Peter standing waiting. . . .

Her bridesmaids clustered around her, spreading out the great stiff train, pulling down the falls of cloudy lace. There was nothing more to worry about. There never would be anything more to worry about again. She was going to marry Peter.

The faces that swung round as she moved up the aisle, the thunder of the organ, the white-surpliced figures impinging upon her mind in one complete picture, suddenly blurred and whirled into a tiny pinpoint around which there was a breathless beating, which was the hammer of her heart against her ribs. She was no longer capable of accepting with her conscious mind any of the details which her eyes encompassed. She was fined down and reduced to an automaton driven by that rhythmic thumping. It would never be possible for her to remember her own wedding. There

would be nothing left, once it was over, nothing but the recollection of her own nervousness, and an awful horror that when she knelt the stiff satin of her dress would sever with a rending sound.

* * * * *

It was Peter who reduced the situation to normality when he commented upon the appearance of his Great-aunt Georgie, whose fantastic and quivering headgear wobbled in rhythm with her conventional tears and sniffs. He whispered to Geraldine in the vestry, "The poor old trout's got a wig under that flower-basket. Would you like to pull it off?" Then Geraldine giggled and began to enjoy her own wedding at last.

On the way back to the house she informed her husband that she was hungry and intended eating "enormously." Receiving the guests, she looked radiant, and with Peter beside her the pair looked quite ridiculously young. The laughter, the rising clamour of voices, the popping of champagne corks, Uncle Charles looking what Geraldine called "beautiful, my love," and his nephew "remarkably tidy, sir, if I may say so," Prudence Lester, very stately in grey lace and a feather boa, and the great white pyramid of wedding cake—all these things were now become pleasant and precious and enjoyable.

"Still hungry?" Peter whispered to her.

"Terribly."

"Well, I think we might . . ." he broke off.

Geraldine, who was looking up at him, saw his jaw drop and a quick mask of horror shroud his laughing face. The smile was wiped from her own face, but, still in ignorance of the cause, she turned away from him, following the line of his vision, his horror.

There, before them, in the opening of the double-folded doors, there, with a smirk upon his countenance, stood Alaric Dingleby.

Before anyone could move or speak . . .

"No one need announce me," said the apparition, "totally unnecessary," and his command halted the advancing servants who hovered, uncertain, bewildered. Prudence and Charles Heatherstead were momentarily out of sight.

Peter Heatherstead moved. Geraldine stood quite stiffly, like a wax image, white, and staring.

"Stand back young man," said Alaric loudly, "stand back and let me kiss the bride. Let her loving uncle kiss the bride."

Heads were now turning down the room. Wide eyes, lifted brows, even a whisper, which in the sudden stillness was a clarion, "*That's the awful Dingleby man!*"

Alaric clutched the two vases, one in the curve of his left arm, the other clasped by his left hand to the front of his soiled waistcoat. The fingers of his hand, yellowed, taloned, dirty, were outspread supporting the weight of the two terrible vases. He appeared intensely tall—an illusion enhanced by his thinness. A top-hat lurched upon the side of his head, his hair needed cutting. A silver holder, askew on the lapel of his frock-coat, contained a camellia which was very brown at the edges.

Before Peter could reach him, Geraldine flung out her hands. "Don't touch me," she said loudly, "don't touch me!" And still she did not move.

Through the startled groups, Prudence and Charles thrust themselves. The beginnings of realization dawned upon Alaric. The edges of his leer withered and a red anger crept into his pouch-framed eyes. "What's this, madam?" he shouted, straddling the carpet with his legs wide apart.

Peter moved towards him.

"Damn you, stand back!" said Alaric furiously. "Here's a greeting for your loving uncle, come on your wedding day to bring you gifts! What foul poison has warped your vision?" He started forward and Peter barred the way.

"Get him outside." It was Prudence, sweeping towards them. "Get him outside and close the doors."

Alaric heard her. As did the entire room. "No need to close the doors," he shouted, his lip curling back from his broken teeth. "I know where I'm not wanted." With hurried fumbling hands he rolled the two vases across his attenuated middle until he could clasp one with each hand, then he lifted them, and before an upraised arm could stay him he crashed the two vases to the ground. "Take your wedding present," he screamed, a light foam flecking that working mouth, "and may you rot in hell for your damned canting, sanctimonious unfriendliness."

He swung round, his feet crackling on the slivers of china; he flung out his now empty arms, and pushed the servants back. "Get out of my way!" he yelled, forcing a passage for himself. "Get out of my way!" And as he had come, an apparition, so he went, with his shouted words eddying back along the wide hall long after he had disappeared. And still Geraldine remained unmoving, with her fingers at her shaking mouth, and her grey eyes staring.

There was a murmurous uprising of sound. Two maids materialized with brushes and the little rattle of broken china mingled with the rising comments as the debris disappeared and the wide doors were folded over, enclosing the room from further violation.

Prudence, Charles, and Peter gathered around the bride.

"My darling—don't mind," said Prudence, her fingers closing on the girl's arm. "There are none but friends here. We all know him. It doesn't matter."

The guests closed in on her. "Gerry darling, it's quite all right." "Gerry, don't mind so much." "Geraldine, it's unimportant." "Geraldine, my dear, would you like to go to your room?" Words eddied about her. Kindly words. She was enmeshed with sympathy. Also she appeared entranced. Then at last she moved. "Thank you all very much," she said, and her lips appeared stiff. "I am quite all right—really."

* * * * *

She stood in her room, changing. Stella held out her hat. She was already in her going-away dress and her furs were looped over Prudence's arm.

"I should never have married Peter," she said tonelessly. "Never. It was all quite wrong."

"Nonsense," said Prudence briskly, "stuff and nonsense. It was excessively unfortunate. Everyone will agree upon that, but it was nothing more. Both before and after he came your wedding was perfect, as your marriage will be."

Geraldine sat down on the edge of her bed. "With madness in my blood?" she asked.

"You have no madness in your blood," Prudence said patiently. "I told you that a long time ago."

Geraldine's eyes were unreceptive. She was still looking back. "He had foam on his lips," she said. "He was quite, quite mad."

"Possibly he was," Prudence agreed, "but not hereditary madness. Old Joe, his father, was a sane, sound materialist, without a flicker of disorder to his mind. Believe me, Gerry, I *know*."

"But do you?" Geraldine looked at her. "Does anyone? This happening was an omen. An omen of the unhappiness I must have because I have his blood, Dingleby blood, in my veins." Suddenly a note of prophecy crept into her voice and her two hearers were appalled. "It was all right," she said, "while the ripples of our separate lives never touched. But now they have touched, some vibration of his dreadfulness will attach itself to my life. I know it. I know it quite surely."

No one spoke. Geraldine put out her hands to her wedding dress which was spread out on the bed beside her. She touched it softly, as if she were touching a corpse. Then suddenly her face cleared. "I'm sorry," she said, rising. "I am behaving very badly. We will say no more about it. Really, there is nothing more that can be said. May I have my hat, Stella; Peter must be nearly ready."

Three days later, Peter was recalled from leave, and a few hours afterwards he was on his way back to France.

* * * * *

The telegram was brought to them in the potting sheds, where, with the head gardener and an under-gardener, they were enjoying themselves immensely repotting and tagging the young chrysanthemums which were their particular interest. Prudence Heatherstead, wearing large gardening gloves and a vast straw hat, was sitting on an upturned box outside the main shed, with a mould-filled pot on another box before her. She held a young plant with its closely interwoven ball of roots cupped in her hands, while her husband, with a yellowed panama shifted well back on his head, scooped out a hollow in the mould and invited her to "drop the feller in now, Prue."

Here the parlour-maid found them. She came threading between flaming borders with the long streamers of her cap drifting out behind her in the breeze.

Mrs. Heatherstead looked up. "Telegram," she said distastefully; "hateful things—mercifully Peter is on leave, otherwise I do not think I should dare to open it." She ripped back the flap and unfolded the paper.

Recalled immediately—unable return home—reporting direct—please send carriage meet Geraldine 6.18 train. Will try to phone you, dear, love, Peter.

She read it aloud, crumpled it in her hands, looked rather uncertainly at the chrysanthemum which, not having been embedded firmly, lurched sideways in its pot. "No reply, thank you, Parsons," she said. "You had better put Mrs. Peter into the blue room for to-night. She is returning unexpectedly."

Parsons went back, flying her streamers behind her, and Charles Heatherstead delved for his pipe.

"Poor little devil," he said to the chrysanthemum.

Prudence grabbed the plant and began ramming the mould round it. "Three days," she said.

"Yes—confounded pipe won't draw, Prudence."

She looked up. "Charles, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know. What can we do? If she wants to move into the house, it is all ready for her, but I think it would be wiser for her to stay here with us. At any rate, for a while. Peter's returning so soon must make her unsettled. Can't think it wise for her to be too much alone. Damn this pipe!"

"Charles!"

"Sorry, my dear."

"If I only knew how she had taken it."

"One never knows with Geraldine," he mused. "She takes some trivial things so hardly—and the big ones . . . I dunno."

"How can we know." Mrs. Heatherstead staked and tied the plant fiercely. "She hasn't lived long enough to have been faced with any big things—now she's having them all at once. Smith, you can take this plant. Mr. Heatherstead and I are going back to the house."

The gardener came out of the shed. The sunlight made black background behind him, and touched up the mesh of fine lines on his face.

"Not bad news I hope, mum?"

"Mr. Peter's been recalled. I suppose that means France."

"Yess'm, I suppose it does."

He looked at her with vague bewilderment. "These wars," he said lamely.

"Yes, Smith—as you say—these wars." She handed him the plant and brushed the soil from her gloves. "Mrs. Peter is coming home to-night."

She moved, along the path, beside her husband, and left the man standing with the young plant staring after her.

"These wars," he repeated to himself. Then took a bright handkerchief from the pocket of his apron and wiped the fine beads of sweat from his face.

* * * * *

"It's an extraordinary thing," mused Prudence, as they went towards the stables, "how whenever I hear distressing news the weather is at its most exultant, as if in mockery. Look at to-day! And Peter is going back to France! Charles, have you any feeling about Peter's safety?"

"No, my dear, I haven't. In a way I am glad. To have a genuine feeling would be even more frightening than the uncertainty. I knew a man many years ago who felt he knew . . . about such things. Because what he knew was unwelcome to him, he declared his instinct and then overrode it. His instinct did not play him false. Therefore, with Peter, I would be convinced if I had any such intuition that it would be inescapable, and I prefer to trust in my God."

"Even that becomes difficult in moments such as these."

He took her right hand and drew it through his left arm. "There isn't anything else any of us can do. What was it Christ said . . . if it be Thy Will."

"Will there always be wars?" she asked suddenly.

"I think so. I like to believe that this will be the last of the wars. As some people would have us believe. I like to dream that this will be the war to end all wars, and—what is that phrase?—'England a land fit for heroes to live in,' but somehow I don't think it will be."

"You mean all this loss—all this pain . . . and for nothing?"

"No, not for nothing. That's beyond my credence. But for very little. Wars, pestilence, and sudden death, they are part of the pattern. Inexorably. As charity, sacrifice, love, and supreme heroism. I am not altogether sure even now that war is wholly a bad thing."

She drew her arm away—repelled. "What good can come out of this?"

" 'Believing from whence we came,' " he quoted, " 'thinking on whence we go . . .' then the business of dying for a cause becomes about the finest gesture that a man may make for his fellow-men."

"Even if it's vested in failure?"

"Failure, too, is only a relative term," he reminded her. "What may appear to be failure here, while we are living this life, may be a superb measure of success . . . afterwards."

"You know," she said sadly, "the older I get the more I believe that man and woman are incapable of looking together along the same straight line. Man's thinking is more clear. Oh, with all this talk of feminism, woman's rights, the future for our sex, I must be sadly in the minority. But it does appear to me that while we look as best we can along the line of our limited vision, man can see, without hindrance, much farther, much more rationally, and with a more *pure* kind of abstract thinking than a woman's mind is capable of achieving."

"Tell that to some of your Suffragette friends," he said, smiling at her, "and your drawing-rooms will be sadly thinned of guests."

She closed her lips stubbornly. Then she defended herself. "Look at the words you have just used. You can accept the inevitability of wars and still turn hopefully towards the future. I cannot support such a

belief, and still hope for the coming generations. I can't see so far. And yet something inside me tells me that you are right."

He did not answer her. They came to the stables, where the coachman was polishing his brasses in the sun, sending burnished slants of light over the cobbles. Prudence told him that Geraldine was coming home, and then went slowly back to the house.

* * * * *

They waited for Geraldine in the long, cool drawing-room. The logs burned gently in the fire-place and dropped down their silvered ash into the grate. Through the open windows came the clamour of rooks quarrelling. They were silent, as they waited, and the ticking of the French clock on the mantel was loud in the tranquil room.

They wondered how she would come home. They remembered her gusts of temper, her spurts of tears, her quick, unexpected, responses, the urgency of her approaches, and the tense tragedy with which she invested so many things. Now she had been married for three days, and she was coming back while her husband went back to the seemingly endless war.

When the bell pealed through the house, they looked at each other and waited. But the voices were soft in the hall and they heard nothing until the drawing-room doors were opened and she came in.

She was dressed in fawn, with a black velvet hat over her fair hair. Prudence had objected at the choice of such a hat. Too old, she had murmured. But Geraldine had insisted. And now it was not too old for the young, calm face under the wide brim.

"Poor darlings," she said, coming over to them with her skirts rustling softly. "Poor darlings—sitting waiting. It must have been awful for you, wondering how we both felt. We're all right, you know. There's nothing to worry about. And Peter will be all right, too."

She unpinned her hat, drew up a stool, and sat down between them with her fingers laced across her knees.

"Peter is going to try to telephone this evening—if he is still in England. He told me to tell you not to worry, everything would be all right. When I saw him off on the train (he couldn't wait for mine), he said, 'Nothing can happen to a man lucky enough to marry you, Gerry. Tell them I'll write and it will be over soon.' "

She went on talking in her low, cool voice, telling them about her honeymoon, and they were both silent while she spoke.

"We had a perfect honeymoon. We made plans for after the war. I don't mind if we are never rich. You know I don't care very much about money and nor does Peter. He's going to write. And I'm going to try. And we shall live in Uncle Charles's house and have hundreds of babies." She added, "Did you expect me to be very difficult, Aunt Prudence?"

Prudence Heatherstead smiled. "I expected you to be a child still," she said quietly. "I did not realize you could grow up in three days."

"Nor did I," she agreed. "That's Peter. I was always comfortable with him before we were married, but not comfortable enough because I still

had fears, but I haven't got any more fears now, and that's probably why I've grown up."

"What made you lose your fears?" asked Charles curiously.

She drew her brows together. "Difficult to say exactly. That business of Uncle Alaric on our wedding day. I was only so ashamed because I thought Peter would mind. And that it would hurt my babies, having his kind of blood in me. Peter made me see that it doesn't really matter about one's family if one is not going to allow what they did and how they lived to have any effect upon one's own life."

Charles Heatherstead grunted approvingly. "Environment, my girl."

"Yes, Uncle Charles—but I didn't see it that way before. The devils in oneself that have been put there by heredity are devils that can be fought. Easier anyway than the devils in one's surroundings."

Prudence Heatherstead lifted her hands in warning. "Charles," she said firmly, "don't you dare. Much as I sympathize with your causes, I refuse to allow you to embark upon another dissertation upon your Easterbridge housing problems. Geraldine is tired and needs to have a rest before dinner."

"I don't, Aunt Prudence," said Geraldine. "I feel perfectly fresh. I want Uncle Charles to let me help him with his housing problems now. After all, I am a married woman, and it is *comme il faut* for me to go into places now that you wouldn't let me visit before."

Mrs. Heatherstead decided to side-step this. "What you do while you are here, my dear, is naturally subject to your own wishes. . . ."

Geraldine cut in swiftly. "While I'm here? Oh, darling, please don't be hurt, please try to understand. I am not staying here. Just as soon as our house is ready I want to move into it and begin to get a home ready for Peter." The words came cascading out now, and the grown-up woman looked extremely girlish and eager. "I shan't be lonely, truly I won't, with you and Uncles Charles so near that I can come over every day, but I want to be in my own home. Let me try to explain. I have a feeling that part of my job, to make sure that Peter comes home safely, is to begin our joint life even without him in the perfect faith that he will join me presently. Call it a superstition if you like, but I must do it. If I don't do it, he won't come home."

Her listeners exchanged glances. Charles Heatherstead cleared his throat. "Is that what your instinct tells you?" he asked her.

"Yes, Uncle Charles." she looked anxiously from one to the other. "You aren't hurt, are you?"

Again they looked at one another. In this look there was complete accord. Charles Heatherstead slowly shook his head. His wife answered, "No, my dear, we are not hurt, and we understand perfectly. Stay with us for a day or so while we put a few touches to the house—it is cleared and ready—and then we will help you to move in."

Geraldine sighed thankfully. "I knew you would understand."

"Is this Peter's wish also?" asked Charles.

"Yes, Uncle Charles. He said at first he thought I was too young.

Then he said that it was mean of me to steal a march on him, but maybe I could get some practice before he came home."

Charles Heatherstead smiled. "Practice?"

"Yes, at running a home, ordering, managing maids. Don't you see, by the time he does get back I shall be a practised housekeeper and ready for us to do all the things we plan to do together. Besides"—the shadows came down over her face for an instant—"don't you see," she faltered slightly, "it will be easier that way. I shan't have anything to do here. It's all done for me. I should have so much time to think . . . and I don't feel that I would like to have a great deal of time on my hands for thinking just . . . just at the moment."

Charles Heatherstead got out of his chair and moved towards the door. Then he turned and looked thoughtfully at Geraldine.

"Do you mind very much, my dear?" he asked.

Geraldine looked at him. "It's difficult to say, Uncle Charles. I mind so much that sometimes I find it unbearable. Then again, I mind so little if I have Peter for my husband that this . . . becomes unimportant."

He nodded. "Once upon a time," he said, "a Frenchman had a particularly good shot at defining what you mean. I don't know that I can remember faultlessly. I can try at any rate. Then he began to quote:

"If Love should count you worthy, and should deign
One day to seek your door and be your Guest—
Pause—'ere you draw the bolt and bid him rest
If in your old content you would remain.

For not alone he comes—in his train
Are Angels of the Mist—Gloried and Undefiled—
Dreams of the Unfulfilled and Unpossessed,
And of Sorrow and Life's Immemorial Pain.

He'll show you Stars you never saw before—
You will dream Dreams you never will forget—
He'll make you bear with him for Evermore
The Burden of the World's Divine Regret.

How wise you were to open not—and yet
How poor if you should turn him from the door."[1]

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When he had finished, he closed the door, and left them alone together by the fire.

1. Written by Jacquier in 1765 as a definition of the word Love and translated from the French. Reproduced by C. E. Montague in his book *The Right Place.*

CHAPTER VI

FOR several years the small Elizabethan house in St. Jude's Court had been familiar to Geraldine. She had visited there constantly, for "tea with Uncle Charles" had been a bi-weekly institution which she had always anticipated with eagerness and given thought to in retrospect. Therefore, she did not feel any particular sensation of strangeness when she arrived there as mistress. There was no disconcerting sensation of being on probation with the spirit of the house. She had already familiarized herself with it, and there was harmony between them.

Mrs. Tritt, who opened the door to her when she arrived, had agreed to continue as housekeeper under the new regime. She, too, invested the arrival with warmth and friendliness. She had aged considerably, wore her best bombazine, her largest hair-brooch, and a pair of long jet earrings which made her face look like a crimson upholstered four-poster bed ornamented with black bell-pulls.

She smiled, fluttered on the brink of indecorous familiarity—one sight of the pale, charming face under the big hat, and she began, smilingly, "Well, and come along in, deary," pulled herself up short and said more primly, "We are very glad to welcome you, ma'am; tea is laid in the study."

Geraldine was enchanted. She said, with two small lights dancing in her eyes, "I like 'deary' best, Mrs. Tritt."

Mrs. Tritt shook her head. "A slip of the tongue, ma'am—seeing you are only so soon grown from a little girl. I'm sure I apologize."

"Nonsense," said Geraldine. "Shall I help you in with some of my things?"

Mrs. Tritt looked outraged. "Most certainly not, ma'am; if you'll jest step along to the study, which I don't doubt will make a nice morning-room for you and Mr. Peter, the coachman and I will manage. Rose does not commence her duties until the morning."

"Who is Rose?" Geraldine stood just inside her own hall looking down at her housekeeper, who came a half-inch past her shoulder.

"House parlour-maid, m'm. A good woman. A widow woman. She has been in service before. She had not found life easy, and our Mr. Heatherstead, you know what he is, he put her name forward for the post."

"And do you like her?"

"I can't say as I dislike her, m'm. It's too early to judge as yet. New brooms always sweep clean, m'm. She knows her place and can wait at table. Now, m'm, if you'll allow me."

Mrs. Tritt, having cast several anxious glances at the baggage in the carriage and the waiting coachman on the box, turned about and conducted her charge towards the study on the first floor.

Although the afternoon was warm, the small fire burned steadily.

Geraldine went in, listened while Mrs. Tritt told her that she would "bring tea up in a trice," and then sat down in Uncle Charles's old rocking-chair and looked around her.

She had insisted on coming alone. In spite of their remonstrances, she had explained to both Charles and Prudence Heatherstead that she would do much better to arrive in her own home alone, as Peter was not there to accompany her.

Now she looked at the familiar little room and noted its surprising unfamiliarities. The bookshelves were bare. All those rows and rows of books, all those toppling heaps and pyramided stacks were gone to Grafton Place to make way for her own treasures. The dark oak shelves glimmered in loneliness. The desk, too, was cleared and bare. Only a pot of cyclamens bloomed in an old Sèvres bowl. There were no curtains at the windows. Uncle Charles's ancient plush had been taken down to make way for the new chintzes which lay over a chair-back waiting for her approval. The room had been deprived of its character, stripped down to bare essentials, and now waited for her to reinvest it with those attributes which spring from her taste and inclination.

Geraldine got up swiftly and went over to the desk. She pulled open a drawer and found some notepaper, a pen, a silver inkstand, put away until they should be claimed by their owner.

When Mrs. Tritt returned with the tea-tray she found her mistress, head bent, writing hurriedly.

"Oh, Mrs. Tritt," she said, without looking up, "would you have a letter posted for me, please? I am writing to my husband to tell him how beautifully you have made everything ready for me."

"The coachman shall take it, m'm; he's downstairs in the kitchen for a cup of tea. Though, I must say, m'm, you haven't seen nothing yet but the hall and this room."

Geraldine turned around and smiled. "I haven't written to him to-day," she said. "Mr. Peter likes me to write to him every day."

Mrs. Tritt went back to the kitchen and informed the coachman who was blowing upon his saucer that "she's nothing but a child and that much in love it brings tears to my eyes," after which, to restore balance, she spoke harshly to the cat and began to grumble about the butcher's boy.

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Geraldine's contentment, in so far as such a thing was possible in the absence of Peter, was reasonably assured in her new home. Mrs. Tritt, striking a nice balance between being a good servants and being a mother to her, managed to safeguard Geraldine from any possible discomfort in the "settling down" process to which she was submitting herself. At Geraldine's especial request she was taught cooking, and every morning for an hour, with one of Mrs. Tritt's wide, over-short aprons over her dresses, Geraldine stirred and kneaded, mixed and rolled, "in case I should ever be without you, Mrs. Tritt."

She had a quick, eager mind, and she brought to her cooking, as she did to any fresh interest, a clear eagerness which was a spur to her teachers as well as herself. She took charge of the household books, spent hours in the shops familiarizing herself with details of price and weight, learned

the difference between a topside and a scrag-end, and became initiated into the mysteries of young and old fowls, fresh and stale fish, crisp and soft vegetables. These last she rarely needed to buy. Twice a week the carriage brought Prudence from Grafton Place, with Charles at her side, both sitting very upright in the carriage with hampers and baskets beside them and at their feet. The gardens at the Place were plundered, and if it had not been for Rose Cottle's afternoons out, when she tottered down the road with surplus fruit and vegetables for her Aunt O'Twigh, Geraldine would have been hard put to to dispose of all she received.

Rose Cottle therefore proved an ally. She had grown from a thin, rosy-cheeked child into a thin, pallid woman with perpetually frightened eyes and a mouth engraved with sadness. When Charles Heatherstead suggested that she would suit Geraldine as a house parlour-maid, Mrs. Heatherstead had immediately objected for the reason that Rose had been kitchen-maid at "Laurelston." Charles Heatherstead countered with a brief outline of the woman's history—she, too, had dwelt in The Rock—and Prudence relented.

Rose had continued in service at "Laurelston" until some time after the death of Lady Dingleby and Amelia. Then, when Alaric, surprisingly sober, considering he was alone and experiencing, as it were, a close season in mistresses, came upon her in one of the upper corridors, Rose left in haste. Alaric had flattened the frightened girl against the wall, made traditional suggestions to her, and to his furious astonishment got slapped across the face for his pains. Rose went out of the house the same evening, had the courage to tell both her aunt and her next mistress the reason, and within a week was engaged as housemaid by a friend of Mrs. Lester's. Here she remained for some years, until she married a widower, one who had lived at The Rock for many years.

Rose Cottle's husband (she reverted to her maiden name when it was all over) had married a shrew for his first wife. He was a thick-set sturdy man, a brewer's drayman, with enormous ears and hands. For seven years he endured the hectoring of this first wife who, on the last day of her life, threw an iron pot at his head and gashed his cheek open four inches, before she flung out of the door, across the road, and under another brewer's dray, which accident caused her death.

It was a strange story. The quiet, long brow-beaten widower, with the slow-healing scar still livid on his face, ultimately gathered courage and proposed marriage to Rose, who, encouraged by her aunt, the redoubtable O'Twigh, took him, and moved down the road. Her bridegroom asked her to give up service. She gave up service. Instead, she cleaned the poor rooms of her own home and endured eight years of the most unspeakable hell. For her husband took to himself the attributes of his dead wife and practised unspeakable brutalities upon his new one. At length, after he had beaten her insensible, and she was discovered by Mrs. Sedge on her way home from the local and distinctly tipsy, The Rock achieved sufficient harmony upon that one occasion to inform the police. The man had received a stiff sentence and had died in prison. The remnants of Rose Cottle, with the story of those years etched indelibly

into the lines upon her face, went back into domestic service. Because Charles Heatherstead spoke for her, and because, after she had heard the story, Prudence Heatherstead agreed to her being employed by Geraldine.

She went to Geraldine when she was thirty-two; she stayed with her until she was seventy. And Geraldine gave her all the warmth she ever knew in all her pathetically bitter life.

In those first few weeks of her marriage, Geraldine irradiated a gentle warmth which made her own pale beauty glow, and reached out towards all her companions. Mrs. Tritt basked in her gladness like an old cat in in the sunshine, the Heathersteads watched her with anxious joy, and their friends remarked how radiant she had become. Geraldine, learning how much more simple it is to travel hopefully than to arrive, lived from day to day with her eyes fixed upon that undated horizon when Peter would come home, and so render trivial the disappointments and setbacks of her present life. She set about transforming the house from a bachelor residence into the home of a young wife. When the rooms satisfied her, she turned to the garden, which once more belonged wholly to the house. Charlie Soames had long ago acquired greater acreage elsewhere to supply his greengrocery shop. The vegetable beds remained, and these Geraldine set about reducing in order that she might grow flowers for her own pleasure. The autumn crept into winter, and when the garden was masked with snow and she was driven back into the house she began to write her first book.

Peter's letters came through with some regularity. She knew he was in the line, and she prayed devoutly and sincerely to the God who she felt sure would return her her husband. On Sunday morning she walked to church with Rose and Mrs. Tritt following her. On this attendance she had shown herself to be a young autocrat. She renewed her friendship with Sheila Prestwick, the vicar's daughter, now engaged to a young curate, and it was to them, during afternoon tea in the first-floor study, that Geraldine broached her first request for welfare work.

"I want to find out how the poor do live," she told them, sitting on a stool before the fire with her knees drawn up and her fingers laced across them. "I do not know. Do you, Sheila?"

Sheila said vaguely that she thought she did. There was a lack of animation in her tone that sprang not so much from indifference as to their state but apathy arising from her inherently lazy nature. "When I am married," she said lightly, "I'll settle down to good work."

"I don't want to do good work," exclaimed Geraldine with some impatience. "From what I have seen that usually means poking one's nose in where it isn't wanted and being a nuisance to people too poor to protest."

"Then," said the curate with a smile, "what is it that you do want, Mrs. Heatherstead?"

Geraldine told them, driving towards her point with the same eager intensity she had brought to the cooking and the garden. "I want to know how they live, Mr. Paley. When I know that, by seeing for myself

and not just by hearsay, then I want to know why they are allowed to live that way."

"In some cases," said the curate gently, "it isn't a case of allowing."

"But surely no one would want to live in squalor?"

"There are people," he said hesitatingly, "who seem to be reasonably content in that state. Who, it would appear, almost deliberately reduce comparative comfort to squalor, either through indifference or sheer laziness."

"Might it not be," flashed Geraldine, "through ignorance, Mr. Paley?"

"What sort of ignorance, Mrs. Heatherstead?"

"The ignorance of environment. My Uncle Charles's pet hobby horse. If since they were babies they have been condemned by circumstances to live in filth and degradation, how would it be possible, if they were given something different, for them to know the way in which to live differently if they were not shown?"

He asked her after a few moments of thought. "Are you suggesting that the mature generation of slovens is almost certainly beyond redemption then?"

"Yes," said Geraldine, "I am. I am saying that I think it is only the ones who are still children who can be brought out of the conditions of which we speak and made into different kinds of persons. I don't think we can change the grown-ups."

Sheila Prestwick leaned forward. "Then you mean that each generation that is allowed to grow up that way is a damned generation?"

Geraldine nodded. "I think so. But most of what I think is based upon what I have heard and not what I have seen. I want to see the slums of Easterbridge because I believe they are no different from the slums of any reasonably sized town. Uncle Charles says the same. If the places we have in this town are representative, and if they are dreadful, then I for one shall not rest until I have got something done about them."

Sheila looked at her thoughtfully. "Gerry, do you know who owns a great number of them?"

"No," said Geraldine, with a tip of her chin, "but I intend to find out."

"I can tell you."

"You can." Geraldine looked surprised and interested. "Well, who does?"

"Alaric Dingleby."

The name was like a bucket of filth flung across a clean garment.

"Alaric Dingleby," Geraldine repeated. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. I heard my father talking to your uncle. Your uncle said, 'That feller Dingleby ought to be shown up.' "

Geraldine closed her lips tightly.

"Perhaps," she said slowly, "he will be."

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It became an obsession with her. She went down into the slums with Sheila's curate. She went into the houses and she saw for herself. She learned something of the way they lived, but, because of her youth, there was a small conspiracy among her friends to conceal from her the more dreadful of their practices. She met May Burrage, pregnant again, with three children now clustering at her soiled skirts. She guessed that the children were illegitimate, but she did not know that they were incestuous. From what she did learn she built a chamber of horrors within her own mind in which her spirit walked in the lonely nights staring at the dreadful figures, reading the horrid inscriptions of their sins and sufferings. Alaric Dingleby, because he was her relative, became the most evil bogy that her mind could conjure. She shivered when she thought of him, and wrote telling her husband of all that she had seen and now knew.

Peter wrote back characteristically. "When the war's over," he said, "I'll come back and help you. It's no earthly use smacking out against individuals. It's a nation-wide stir-up, my girl, that the country will need if it's to put such wrongs to rights. There's no good in your making yourself ill worrying about it. Let it ride until I come home. Don't think I'm callous, Gerry. I know how you feel. I know how Uncle Charles has felt all these years. But the whole thing is too big for one young woman alone. There are men at the top of the local government who make these conditions prevail. They're the brutes we need to tackle. And, believe me, we'll tackle them—when I come home."' Then Peter went on with his letter and let the subject rest.

This viewpoint Geraldine discussed with Charles Heatherstead. "Let Peter take a hand," he agreed, pacing the paths of the Grafton Place garden with her, and watching the first snowdrops break through their white prisons. "Local government's the thing. The men who control the business interests in the town control the administration also. It's a man's job to combat a thing like that. You can give Peter all the support he'll need in the background. Don't take the world's or the town's trouble too hard yet, my child. You're too young to sorrow for the national disasters."

"But I do, you know," said Geraldine slowly. "I can't explain it. I only know that while there are many people who don't care at all what happens outside their own particular circle of friends, I do care without wanting to. It isn't a thing I've put into myself. It's there, without any promoting from me, and it gives me a great pain sometimes, till I could cry for all the people that I do not know who are suffering through the blind cruelty of others."

Charles Heatherstead accepted this statement with great misgiving. In the course of conversation with his wife, he was reassured to a small degree by what she said.

"A few babies will put an end to all that, Charles. The tragedies of the outside world are nearly always the accepted obligation of persons who have been deprived of a full personal life. If Geraldine had decided that she had a vocation then I should really have been afraid. I may as well confess that I did expect such an issue once or twice when she was younger. It was, to a certain extent, an influencing factor in my decision

to let her marry. Had she elected to live an entirely spiritual life, no personal issues or influences would have touched her choice. She just did not have enough personal ruthlessness to do any such thing. It is very possible the world has been deprived of another saint, but I am sufficiently material to be glad events have moved the way they have done. Of course, it becomes obvious that my love for Geraldine is entirely selfish. Because I would have lost her if she had taken the vows, I am content that she has not. It might be that without a nun's coif and habit she may become just as spiritually intense. We can only watch and wait. I still hope that babies will keep the scales evenly distributed between normal healthy materialism and the high æsthetic purposes of idealists."

While her guardian discussed her, Geraldine went on serenely with the occupations she had chosen in order to bridge the time which lay before her until Peter should come home.

She sat in "Uncle Charles's study"—it was never changed into a morning-room, nor was its name ever altered—with several penny note-books, a number of very carefully sharpened pencils, which lay about the desk like scattered porcupine quills, and a weighty frown creasing her forehead. She wrote *Chapter I* a great many times, and after following the heading with a few pages of scribbled wordage, she ripped out what she had done and scrunched it into the waste-paper basket. She despaired, and enthused, dramatized herself a little, spent a number of hours staring at the window-panes, and in general conducted herself in a perfectly rational manner in the matter of her first book. She went for long walks alone, or with Sheila Prestwick, talking copiously, and drenching the bemused Sheila with the spate of her words. The two girls joined a local discussion group, a debating society, and changed books at the public library twice a week. If she ever saw Alaric Dingleby stalking through the town, she either plunged through the doorway of the nearest shop or struck off down a convenient side-turning. The sight of her uncle produced a feeling of impotent distaste in her. After these evaded encounters she would pester her aunt, her uncle, or Mrs. Tritt with queries as to who was responsible for adjusting the housing conditions. She never received any satisfaction, and she continued to write long letters to her husband, pleading for his co-operation.

The spring came again, and the word Armistice infiltrated into general conversation. Hope and spring, the twin immortals, crept out of Time's womb into a weary world, and people began to see the end in sight. Even Peter was influenced in his letters. He wrote in the May of nineteen eighteen, "The chaps out here think it cannot be long now. God knows why, because the situation is grim, but that's what we think. We cannot see it happening, we haven't the slightest idea how it could happen, but there is a feeling . . . call it spring. . . . "

Geraldine became radiant. She began a new waking dream with which she filled the hours when she was alone. It was the timeless, eternal dream of all women who wait. . . .

One day, one day soon, the gate would swing back, Peter would rush up the path, she would meet him, and everything that had filled the days

and nights with unadmitted fears would be swept away. After that, so appeared her dream, nothing that could ever happen in that future when they were together could contain any real grief or pain or suffering, because, by their shared presence, all such afflictions would be nullified.

Then the dream came true and he returned. He did not swing open the gate. He did not come rushing up the path crying her name. So far as those things were concerned, the dream was false. He came back in the brougham, a rug over his knees, and pillows behind his shoulders, with Charles Heatherstead sitting beside him.

Peter Heatherstead came back, the returned, no-longer-serviceable, late property of His Majesty's Government. One of the heroes of whom the gun-shy roared on platforms and at street corners. He came back, paper-thin, yellow-skinned, and breathing with a ragged, painful sound like thick paper tearing slowly, and as he breathed the tearing was reflected in his face. He was a stranger wearing the features of his other self: the clear young features of the boy who had fished with Geraldine. The stranger was chiselled from the outcroppings of modern warfare, burned inwardly with the scorch of mustard gas, and seared outwardly with the marks of the concommitant pain. Only those things which were eternal remained of what he had been before. Observance, humour, the hungers of loneliness: the ignorance of external change which is every man's inheritance against the ravages of time and circumstance. No man can ever know how much experience marks him. Only his friends and those to whom he has long been familiar can reckon the infinite details of such changing. Charles Heatherstead read every one aright, and the story which he read was an exquisite, inarticulate agony which must always be concealed.

They had none of them known that he was coming; the advice came two days later. When the phone rang at the house in St. Jude's Place, Geraldine was out. Mrs. Tritt took it upon herself to telephone Grafton Place. Charles went alone to the station and left his wife at the little house to prepare Geraldine, should she return.

She knew by then that Peter had been gassed. She knew that he was not yet well. She had known for some time: since she was first told that he was in hospital, first at base, later in England . . . but she did not know he was coming home. It was she who swung open the gate; it was she who ran up the path, wrenched open the door, went on flying feet to the drawing-room, and found him in a big chair by the hearth, and Prudence and Charles beside him.

In the days and weeks and months that followed she learned to forget the sufferings of the world without the anodyne of children. She learned by the immediate, inexorable narrowing down of all her thoughts and hopes in the angular ragged-breathed companion with whom she spent every moment of every day.

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There was no question that Peter might die. There was no such fear for any of them. His expectation of life was reasonably assured. He had

not lost his life in the service of his country, he had only lost his youth, his vitality, his clear, quick eagerness, and his abundant energy. He still had the breath in his burned lungs, which whistled and rasped, and he had, too, a dry, torn cough, which was like a familiar which rode him constantly. His heart, they said, was strained. With reasonable care he should do well enough. The men who used that devilish ambiguity of speech did not allow themselves the generosity of enlarging upon the phrase. "Do well enough," meant live! Surely that in itself was precious? That spontaneity of action was gone—that in itself the inward leap of youth should be tempered to the cautious progress of senility was . . . merely a pity. But he was not alone in his affliction. Nor was he armless, nor legless, nor blind. Nor, let everyone remember, was he dead!

Prudence Heatherstead never reminded her husband, because she loved him and love does not countenance mockery, that he had said to her a brief three years before that he did not believe altogether that war was a bad thing. . . .

War was no longer spoken of in the little house in St. Jude's Place, nor was it often spoken of at Grafton Place. War had become to the occupants of both houses Peter Heatherstead and his state of health, and when peace came at length and Armistice was declared, "when men and women ran wild about the streets and the bells rang out and the cheers echoed through the streets and houses," Geraldine and Peter sat together in the garden, and it was Peter Heatherstead who cried.

CHAPTER VII

THE Armistice between England and her Allies, and Germany, lasted for twenty-one years, and then hostilities were resumed. There never was a Peace; only a spurious, blind-eyed policy of *laisser-faire* which lasted long enough to prepare another generation for the holocaust. By ignorance out of graft, by self-seeking out of idiocy, by crime out of negligence, and by sloth out of conceit the Four Horsemen were born once more, still reeking from the matter expelled in parturition, Murder, Famine, Pestilence, and Death rode blear-eyed across the world.

All life is dependent upon movement. Nothing, it is claimed, is static. Everything is impelled by Higher Forces to be progressive or retrogressive, therefore it is not possible to assert that England stood still in those unfruitful years, but it is not more than the truth to aver that if indeed her movements were not retrogressive, then at the best they were like the idle perambulations of an unsuccessful beggar who pauses more often than he moves and spends many hours propped against the broken fences of derelict buildings.

To the small world of England, in the larger world of earth, whirling madly about in space among the other unnumbered worlds, Easterbridge was to the whole proportionally what the atom is to the mountain, because the components of the whole were accurately repeated in the part.

Insomuch as certain vice to be found in Port Said may possibly not be practised in Easterbridge, there were differences. But insomuch as Port Said, London, and Easterbridge in varying degrees contain the same elements of vice, they were identical.

So it was in those barren years in terms of rehabilitation, administration, and foresight. Under the distorting canopy of such conditions, the personal lives of each creature not rich enough to live apart in luxury were sublimated by the resultant shadows. And the years went by while the mature grew old and the young grew up . . . and still there was only infinitesimal change.

To Geraldine Heatherstead these years were fraught with a bitterness which she saw in perfect clarity, as she passed from girlhood into womanhood and middle age. While denying the evidence of her own eyes and senses, she steadfastly refused personal embittering.

As Easterbridge was the stem to England the mountain, so she was the infinitesimal ant scurrying about the multitudinous ant-heap. Her griefs were England's griefs, and her sorrows the sorrows of her generation —that lost generation once more to be tortured with the resumption of war hostilities.

She was one of a sisterhood to whom girlhood symbolized the loss of friends, lovers, romances; the severance of those intimate relations which owe their deep foundation to youthful commencement of association. Of the young men with whom she played tennis and went picnics, only one remained, her own husband, and he no longer a young man except in age. Of her dream of children, nothing; for she and Peter remained childless. Of the radiant future they had envisaged together, she had little, and only their devotion held them in a marriage that was little more than the relationship of nurse and patient. Peter never regained his health. The Quixote who was to have tilted at the windmills of local administration became a frail creature whose life was lived from a wheel-chair and a day-bed. The Geraldine who was to have written many novels became the secretary who transcribed her husband's work, when she was not the nurse who guarded the meagre store of energy his spirit still tried to scatter prodigally.

Women who live out their lives attendant upon invalids make few friendships. The young Heathersteads' narrow circle of acquaintanceship had little opportunity for expansion, and the pattern which had once been broad and enlivening shrank with the passing years until by the time Geraldine was close on forty and Peter nearly forty-five . . . they were frequently alone. Death plundered them cruelly when first Charles and then Prudence went—even the faithful Tritt was taken in nineteen thirty-five—and Geraldine went out so seldom, and then so hurriedly, that in ten years she had never seen Alaric Dingleby and could not have told whether he were dead or not, except that she realized vaguely that if he were dead there would have been some mention of the fact in the local paper.

Mr. Proberty was a regular visitor. He was now grown very old, but he still retained a great part of his vigour, if the roses in his round face were fading, and he still became incensed at the mention of housing, at

which mention he would launch forth upon a lengthy diatribe which left him in bad humour and considerably out of breath.

The houses in The Rock, and the other similar houses, drooped and mouldered in increasing abomination. Henry Truslove, now managing director of the Emporium, became Mayor, grew corpulent, remained furtive, and finally retired from civic and commercial life, well-breeched, well-satisfied, and well-hated. He bought a large house adjoining "Laurelston," adopted horticulture as a hobby, and went regularly to church. Another lean, harassed individual was rent collector at The Rock, knocking upon the same doors each week, and in a great many cases being answered by the same people.

May Burrage still opened the door of No 1. She was grown gargantuan. She looked sixty and was still in her forties, wore, unvaryingly, a faded pink cardigan, safety-pinned over the vast ravine which ran down greyly between her wobbling breasts. Her feet were shod in brown plimsols, cut away raggedly to ease her bunions. Her hair was permanently tortured in kirb-i-grips and curlers. Her boot-button eyes still held a lingering come-hither glimmer, her chins ran down in a greasy terrace to her chest.

She lived with her four sons, and every Sunday, with some of their earnings, she bought a bunch of flowers and marched with it to the churchyard where she laid it upon her father's grave. It made her feel respectable. She always reminded the "rent man," whom she loathed, of this weekly pilgrimage to a sinful memory. She always told him, too, that he showed favouritism to another of her enemies, a Mrs. Brogan, who lived at No. 26. "Thinks herself the queen of the street," she would bawl: "2 ozs. of 'am and please cut it thin!—mean, low-down, common, dirty article, that's what she is!" May was still vehement.

Mrs. Sedge still lived at No. 2. Alone when Perce was "in," with Perce and his more than dubious companions when he was "out." But as Perce was a bad crook, he was more often "in" than "out" and she was lonely. Therefore, she tippled, and scratched a living scrubbing at the local theatre. When she was not scratching a living or tippling she was just scratching. The house was lousy, and had been for some years.

There were strangers in No. 11. Their house was clean and cared for. Peter, through his wife, maintained his guardian's tradition when the properties passed to him.

At No. 14, Mrs. O'Twigh remained with Tommy and his wife and two children. Here Rose continued to take weekly baskets of fruit and vegetables, grown now at the St. Jude's Place house, since Charles and Prudence Heatherstead were dead and Grafton Place sold. Sometimes Tommy was in work. More often he was out of work. Then he queued up for the dole, and rolled marbles on the corner. The children played in the street. There was no market for hot manure in the thirties—and very little manure of any sort now that carriage trade was dead.

The children went to the local Council School, where conditions were improved, but as the schooling terminated when they were fourteen, the advantages did them little service. By the time they left they had not

assimilated sufficient knowledge to know even how to learn more of anything. They could read, write and do simple arithmetic. They went to "the pictures" whenever they had any spare money, because "the pictures" spoon-fed their uneducated sensationalisms. For this they were blameless, because the State failed to educate them to anything better.

Tommy Cottle's son George, aged thirteen and a half and leaving school in August, worked on Saturdays for Charlie Soames, the greengrocer. Not that he worked directly under Charlie, because he did not. Charlie only did the books and the ordering, and seldom came out into the shop except for favourite customers—like Mrs. Peter, who was one of the family's close friends.

He had a chain of shops now, two in Easterbridge, one on the south side, one on the north, one in Shoal, the nearby town, and one in Lesser Mellbury, newly opened and flourishing. From small beginnings, by courage and endurance and perfect honesty, Charlie had raised himself above the state in which his parents died. But he had never forgotten. He and his Susan never allowed themselves to forget. They were clear-thinking, hard-working, and they believed that they and the tribes from which they sprang were entitled to a better way of life than that which appeared to them to be unjustly imposed upon them by the administrators or authority. To these ends, when he had finished his business, Charlie laboured. And in nineteen thirty-nine, after innumerable insults, several threats, and the removal of several of his good accounts, Charlie became a Town Councillor. His was a voice crying in the wilderness. It was drowned by the rolling pomposities of the Mayor, Mr. Cullingworth, auctioneer and estate agent, owner of a block of condemned houses, drinking companion of the Rates Officer.

It was drowned, too, by Mr. Hughes, the bookmaker, also the owner of a block of condemned houses, overseer of the Leicester Almshouses. Mr. Hughes's friend, Mr. Roach, was the local builder. He, too, was an enemy of Charles's. He vetoed every suggestion made by the new Councillor, drew six shillings a week for houses that let in the wind and rain, and ran a Daimler car and a string of greyhounds at the local track. Charlie fought them daily, hourly, taking knocks with the equanimity of a man who has become immune through constant battering; talking it all over with his Susan, believing that good might yet come; wheeling his granddaughter about in a glossy pram on Sundays after church and playing bowls in the summer.

In all his intimate conversations with his Susan, Charlie raved more about the Duke of Eston and his criminal negligence than about his level enemies the fellow-tradesmen and aldermen. Charlie's great wail, "Strip 'im down and lay 'im out along of me on a cold slab and who's be to tell which was a lord and which was Charlie Soames?" was a war cry which, to his darning, listening wife, became herald to another outburst resultant upon some small but determined effort to alleviate the discomforts of some unfortunate slum dweller. His other battle cry was in favour of the Heathersteads. "Life ain't fair," he would insist. "There's young Mr. Peter" (he was still "young Mr. Peter" when he was forty) "rotting his life

away through a crool and useless war, and a better man there never drew breath."

Charlie eased his feeling in respect of the Heathersteads by personally selecting their fruit and vegetables, which they bought regularly from his first shop in supreme disregard for the fact that they grew for themselves nearly everything that they needed.

Charlie watched Geraldine grow slowly from the vibrant, eager creature of her youth into the gentle, controlled, patient woman endurance and sadness made of her.

On an afternoon in late summer, Geraldine came into the shop when Charlie was unpacking a crate of grapefruit. She went up to the cash-desk, laid down the slip which listed her requirements, and asked the girl if Mrs. Soames were in.

"She's in the parlour, ma'am," said Charlie, straightening his back. "She'll be glad of a word with you."

He flicked his stubby fingers at his two assistants, "Get this cleared out and see to the customers," he ordered. Then he unfastened his apron and led the way into his sitting-room. He still lived over the first shop. "A working man, I am," he would declare, "and a working man I hope to remain. Electric we have here, and a refrigerator, and a nice radio, and what more does any man want, just because he happens to have a tidy bit put by? If everyone wasn't so greedy . . ."

Now as he thrust open the door of the living-room, he said, "I'm glad to see you, ma'am, there's a word I should be happy to have with you. How is Mr. Peter to-day?"

"Much better, Mr. Soames." Geraldine always said "much better" except when Peter was actually experiencing one of his periodic heart attacks. "He has been enjoying the lovely weather."

Charlie looked around the empty room, drew up a chair, and invited Geraldine to sit down. "The missus must 'ave stepped upstairs. She'll be down in a trice. Would you say no to a cup of tea?"

He always asked her—she always accepted. Now she said, "I certainly should not, Mr. Soames," and stripped off the loose washleather gloves from her narrow hands. The heavy diamond solitaire which had glistened for so many years on Prudence Heatherstead's left hand, looked overlarge and very loose.

Charlie swung open the inner door which led to the stairway and the kitchen, called up, "Mother, are you there? Mrs. 'Eatherstead's honoured us," and went through to the kitchen where he was heard splashing water into the kettle and lighting the gas.

He came back into the sitting-room and saw that Geraldine had picked up the *Daily Mirror* and was glancing across the headlines.

"I don't like it, Mr. Soames," she said. "I am frightened. After the last war I was desperate, then I was despairing, then when he," she dabbed at a photograph, "flew back with that paper I was bitterly ashamed; now I am just frightened." She made a queer little gesture with her hands, as if to ward off some dreaded apparition. "I am terrified. When I remember," she looked down at Charlie's clumsy shoe that covered his artificial

limb, "when we remember," she corrected, "I feel so cold I think I am going to die. It is so unbelievable that all we suffered then was useless, wasted, futile"—her clear voice wavered.

Mrs. Soames came in with a vivid print pinafore over her vivid print dress. Her placid, steady face was shadowed.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," she said, forgetting to smile. "Things look bad—we can't deny it. Terrible bad."

Charlie left them together and went to brew the tea. He heard the two women's voices from the kitchen, the soft clarity of Geraldine's, his own wife's broad burr.

"It has a dreadful effect upon my husband, Mrs. Soames. He becomes distraught. Then he must write. I sit at the typewriter. I type for him the words that pour out. Then later he destroys them. 'What's the use?' he says. 'Wasted effort. Wasted lives. My God, Geraldine, how our lives have been wasted, yours and mine.' He reproaches himself." Geraldine's voice ran down.

"People like you, ma'am, have never spent wasted lives. I'm sure Charlie and me is heartened every day we live by the sight of you both. . . ."

Geraldine spoke again. "I have no right to complain."

Mrs. Soames snorted. It was not an elegant sound. But it was the apotheosis of admiration and sympathy.

Charlie came in with the tea.

"Pour it out, Mother," he said, sliding the tray on to the green chenille cloth. "And don't forget, not much milk, and weak, no sugar."

"What was it you wanted to see me about Mr. Soames?" asked Geraldine.

Charlie blew on his tea reflectively. "Gas-masks," he said lugubriously. "Women's Institute—A.R.P., Evacuation. Now that you 'ave got Rose Cottle's niece to help, I was wondering . . . I want to get a committee of ladies for voluntary emergency help until we know . . . that is, in case . . ."

The lines around Geraldine's mouth were blue.

"You think it's coming?"

"Yes'm, I think it is. And I don't think we shall 'ave to wait long."

Geraldine put down her cup because her hands were shaking.

Susan spoke. "Try not to take it so hard," she urged. "Look at it another way. The job was never finished. Not properly. That's why everything has been such a mess. This time they'll finish it off proper . . it's got to come."

Geraldine listened with her head bent, and across her blinded vision marched a procession of pictures. Nineteen fourteen and the tennis courts at Grafton Place . . . Prudence Lester in her large gardening hat . . . Charles Heatherstead coming across the lawn . . . the press of carriages in the main street the day after war was declared, and women shopping . . her marriage . . . Peter waiting . . . Alaric Dingleby stalking like a spider over the hallway . . . the honeymoon . . . and a lifetime of love

and laughter driven like yoked cattle into the stockades of a three-day honeymoon . . . the years that followed on.

She lifted her head. "Yes," she said with difficulty, "I think you must be right. This time perhaps they will finish it properly. Perhaps they will."

* * * * *

They heard the sirens while they were at church. Peter stretched out his hand and clasped his wife's unsteady fingers. The Mayor and the aldermen sitting in the front pew exchanged significant glances; the service continued. Only Charlie Soames was unmoving. His wife's head, under its flowered hat, bobbed suddenly, then she slipped from the pew and went down the aisle . . . to her children.

Here and there, in the big church, a man or woman moved out quietly. When the service was over, the Reverend Paley and his wife, who had been Sheila Prestwick, stood in the porch and spoke to members of the congregation as they came out. Geraldine and her husband walked out slowly. "If you can spare the time, come to supper, Sheila," said Geraldine.

Sheila's eyes were heavy with unshed tears. "For the second time," she said wearily, "we see the beginnings of a war!"

There was something very like a smile in Peter's eyes. He put up one hand to his grey hair and stroked it. "It's the same war, Sheila," he told her. "Try to come to supper."

* * * * *

They had supper in the small dining-room round the pool-dark oak of the table that had once belonged to Charles Heatherstead. The Romney that had endured those other wars glowed down on them and the late roses on the table were the colour of fresh blood. Rose Cottle, grown gaunt and white-haired, waited upon them. Four people of middle years, become tired in a world grown mad, served by a woman whose whole life had been spent in service.

"If I could only believe that we were prepared," said Henry Paley.

There was a strange sparkle in Peter's eyes. Perceptibly, he was younger than he had been for many years. It was as if his spirit had been revived by some such potent elixir that it inflamed his tired body. He began to speak, twisting the stem of a wineglass under his fingers, staring at the roses.

"For the reason that we are not prepared, I believe our arms will prosper," he said quietly. "I wonder if I can begin to make you understand how exquisite is the relief I am experiencing to-night."

Geraldine stared at her husband with the expression of a woman in whom the nurse is uppermost. She plainly thought him distraught. No one spoke, and after a moment's pause he continued:

"For twenty years," he said, "I have sat in chairs and watched the world without being able to take a hand in its affairs. I have been compelled into the position of a powerless onlooker through my confounded health. I have seen this country, for which I have a perfectly reasonable

affection, slide downward towards an abyss of futility from which there seemed no escape. I have seen us deteriorate into a C3 nation, morally and physically. And I have wondered more than once if there was any use at all in the war that was fought in fourteen—eighteen. I have seen indolence and bribery, many forms of corruption, and at times I have despaired. I think I can say with safety that the most horrible day in all my life, including every hour of the last war, was the day on which the Munich crisis was brought to that unspeakable conclusion by Chamberlain and his associates.

"Now we began again at eleven o'clock this morning to vindicate our errors. Even supposing every one of us should die dreadfully, even supposing England should be overrun by the Hun, I still feel that the days from now onwards will be fraught with greater hope, because at last we have faced our issues. Only God knows what the outcome of this war will be. I think we'll win because I think we're in on the clean side. If ever there was a holy war this is it—should be if we fight it aright. There is no room in humanitarian concepts for such doctrines as Nazism. No future for those who persecute because of race or creed. And no ultimate success for gangsters and torturers, even if they seem to be winning for a time. I think we're in for such hell, before this thing is over, that the last war will shrink to littleness by ultimate comparison, but I'm glad, thankful, exultant, that at last it is upon us, instead of lying like a coiled serpent in an indeterminate to-morrow. Now we can fight it out and have done with it, and through the medium of our sufferings come to see at last that both a national and an international conscience are imperative, in addition to a personal conscience, if we are to advance the cause of humanity beyond primordial standards. I have no theories as to how we shall win, or when, nor if I shall live to see the end, but I believe implicitly that we shall win, and I feel free again and unutterably thankful that we have at last had the courage and the necessity, jointly, to expurgate the evasions of the past twenty years and end that other war."

He stopped speaking, but he went on staring at the roses as if they were a vision, while Geraldine watched him and the corners of her mouth shook. She seemed to see the shadow of the young eagerness that had emanated from him in those days when she first loved him, as though the pain marks faded and left him young in defiance of the lines upon his face and the grey of his hair.

"I wonder how many people can say with me to-night that this dreadful war which lies ahead of us has given me back something which I lost in that other war," she said at last. "Now I am, of course, being wholly selfish. All these years that have been the bridgehead have been stained by our losses. All at once you have made them seem worth while." The light from Peter's eyes was reflected in her own. "I don't think anything will contain fears for me any more," she added, and she began to smile.

* * * * *

It was not possible for Peter Heatherstead to regain his health. But from the night of September the third, nineteen hundred and thirty-nine,

he gained in vitality. He resumed writing with renewed vigour, taught himself to type, and picked over the keyboard with three fingers while Geraldine plunged into war work. Charlie Soames told her that the scandalous condition of the slum properties had finally come to the notice of sufficiently powerful authorities to force a sanitary report, and in nineteen forty-two assured her that the Sanitary Inspector had in fact commenced investigations. All her old enthusiasm rekindled. She went about the town, probing, talking, ferreting, and bringing her scraps of information to Charlie, who gave her every possible support.

Then, in the summer of nineteen forty-three, when the tide of battle had begun to turn, Charlie told her that the sanitary report was almost finished, and that it was certain that there would be a demand for its publication. This became Geraldine's new obsession. To make sure that the report *was* made public. To make sure that it was publicized so strongly that every home throughout the country was made aware that things were as they were.

The spring of nineteen forty-four saw Charlie, on a fine April day, puffing up the hill towards St. Jude's Court with the news that the report was finished. That the members of the Town Council, with himself as the sole opposer, were against the publication of the report, and were doing everything in their power to stop its revelations from being exposed.

Three days later, Geraldine and Peter went to church, at eleven o'clock on the Sunday morning, as they did every Sunday. The Bishop of Shoal, on his annual diocesan visitation, was to preach. The Heathersteads knew Dr. Bradley slightly, admired him intensely, and apart from their personal admiration for him, had a very high regard and reverence for his great spiritual integrity and high honesty of purpose. Geraldine always said of him that he never preached, he only shared his thoughts with them framed in words of such unflowered clarity that they were nothing less than the reflections of a mind irradiated by the spirit of the God he served.

She said, too, that to spend on hour with him was to refresh one's inward knowledge of the goodness of God and the fineness of mankind, because at the same time she knew that a great portion of his strength came from his ability to identify himself with the most simple of persons. Never to awe by the power of his office. Never to bemuse by the posturings of religious affection by which lesser clergy sometimes seek to impress their flock and only repel or intimidate.

She watched him as the service progressed. As he entered the pulpit, clasped his long, strong fingers, and began to speak, as he leaned over the rim of the pulpit and looked down at them. He spoke of their duties towards their neighbours. His clear, beautifully modulated voice travelled easily throughout the church. He spoke very quietly, without mannerism or affectation, without any of the dreadful unctuousness which is sometimes employed by those who preach.

Suddenly he stopped speaking. He looked down at the filled pews. He unclasped his hands and laid them face downwards. He leaned on them and let the pause increase. Then he began again and at his words

a faint shiver, as if a wind had stirred the silent congregation, shook itself out and died . . . of surprise.

"Where more than in the House of God should our duty towards our neighbour be stressed," he asked them. "Insomuch as we admit our great moral responsibilities to our neighbour so must we accept our material obligations to him. I would not be so doing if I did not tell you of what I have heard and seen recently in this town. You would not be so doing if you did not pledge yourselves to do all in your power to arrest the great evils that are being wrought among your neighbours here in Easterbridge.

"I speak of the housing conditions among some of the small streets —where appalling conditions prevail. I intend to tell you of the conditions which I have seen for myself. Conditions of dirt, damp, disease, which are in themselves a refutation of all that is being done on the battlefields of the world in the causes of freedom and peace for which we are fighting. There can be no lasting peace while men and women are permitted to drag out their lives in hovels unfit for human habitation."

The church was as silent as a lake upon a windless day. The rows of faces lifted towards the speaker were palely intense.

"I do not suggest," the Bishop continued, "that all of you are aware of these things. But what I do say is this: every one of you must be made aware, and if any one of you holds him or herself even indirectly responsible for such things, then *something must be done.*

"Let me take you, on this pleasant Sunday morning, while you are gathered together to give thanks to God for His manifold mercies, and before you go home to your meal and your rest, into some of the houses that lie so close to your own homes. Come with me and see what I have seen. I will try to give you a picture of one of these houses—one among so many. All very much the same. But before I do this I will tell you a few of the general conditions.

"The plaster falls from the walls, great pieces crumble away, destroyed by the damp which penetrated through unrepaired roofs and ceilings. Woodwork is rotten, walls infested with lice, wainscots running with mice, and even rats. The sky can be seen from the ground floors through gaping holes in the roofs.

"Water for all purposes is obtained from outside taps which serve groups of houses and are accessible from outside only, whatever the weather conditions. The lavatories are primitive—one serves several houses—they have no windows, the brick walls are streaming with damp, the wooden doors are rotten and worm-eaten. Outside, communal wash-houses have great gaps in the tiling on the roofs, the windows have no glass, and the conditions for work in winter are truly dreadful. Yet, in spite of these conditions, I have visited houses where the women are clean and their children cared for, where the floors are constantly scrubbed, and the bits of buckets and basins which stand about the rooms in wet weather to trap the rain which comes through the broken places are as clean as the women who fight these hopeless battles against decay and dereliction.

"I will tell you something about one of these women and her house.

This woman's husband is in the army; he is a prisoner of war in Japanese hands. She is twenty-six. She has five young children. She pays six shillings and sixpence a week for her house. It has been condemned for some years. In the bedroom in which she sleeps with the two youngest children there is a great bulge over her bed, a bulge of dangerously sagging plaster. Over the window, carefully papered because there is no glass, the plaster has as a result of damp fallen away so completely that the slats are visible and the roof above, where there is a hole large enough to admit a man. Through that hole the rain pours, and the room is consequently bitterly cold in winter. All the woman's appeals to the landlord to make some rough repairs have been ignored. One of the children is in the Mellbury Sanatorium suffering from tuberculosis. The inference is obvious.

"This woman is one of many. She has spent pounds of her own money on distemper and paint. She has made pitiful attempts at elementary plastering.

"I ask you, as Christian men and women, if you think it right that the community should permit such suffering to continue? Every one of us is responsible in some degree or other. You and I, as members of the community; the Town Council, as trustees for the local well-being; and the owners of these houses who take money in rent for houses unfit for human habitation.

"It will not avail any one of us to exonerate ourselves with the cry that someone else is at fault. The fault must be shared among us all. I have listened to all manner of excuses. I have been told that the landlords have tried to do repairs, and that the repairs have been destroyed by the careless tenants. That is no excuse!

"I have been told that repairs cannot be effected while this war lasts. That statement requires two answers. First, that if the work had been carried out conscientiously in the years before this war, the condition of the houses now would not be such that these basic repairs would be necessary. Secondly, that if the community brought pressure to bear upon the right authorities, urgent and essential temporary repairs *could be carried out despite the war.*

"Have any of you considered the revenue yielded by these houses? Have you realized how great a yield over a period of years they provide, without any further outlay over countless years than the initial purchase price?

"None of these houses has changed hands recently, since the price of property has risen so greatly. They were all purchased at very low figures and those figures have not been increased by running repairs.

"I have yet another question. What was done in the years preceding this war to bring pressure to bear upon the authorities to see that the landlords were fulfilling their obligations? Who tried to force the municipal inspectors to insist that the right repairs were carried out? It could have been done! The present conditions of which I speak have not been brought about in a few years. It takes a long time for property to degenerate to the extent these properties have degenerated. I would like

each and every one of you to go and see for yourselves just what these houses are like. I think you would be sickened by what you saw!

"That child, whose father is a prisoner of war in Japanese hands! She has tuberculosis. She is one of many. If you take the trouble to obtain a copy of the Easterbridge Medical Officer of Health's report of T.B. in Easterbridge, published in nineteen twenty-five, you will find that certain passages deal specifically with the incidence of tuberculosis in this town as a direct result of defective housing. I spoke to you just now of the Mellbury Sanatorium where greathearted men and women are labouring unceasingly to combat the ravages of this disease. I have spoken to them, too. I have visited them and their patients. I have prayed with them. But I tell you and I believe that unless you and I back my prayers and yours with conscientious and constructive action, those prayers will be unavailing.

"The things I have spoken of this morning are evil. They are here in our midst. We are part of them unless we make an effort to set them aright. I ask you in the name of Christ, and all suffering humanity, to put an end to them.

"Other things besides lice emanate from filthy walls. Innocent children herded together in damp, cramped houses see, hear, and experience things which they should never know. Their homes warp their minds, blur their vision, distort their souls. All their lives are warped by childhood spent in such terrible conditions. See to it that you go out from here this morning with a firm and unshakable resolve to do your part to bring them to an end . . . and Now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. . . ."

The dazed congregation swept to its feet.

* * * * *

In the front pews the crimson-faced aldermen looked all ways at once in an effort to look nowhere—the Mayor was bulge-eyed. The unanticipated attack had commenced with a broadside which holed their smug complacence.

The organ bellied out a sudden pæan of sound and the church began to empty. The discords began to sound, once the first members of the congregation reached the porch. Inside the church the music from the organ murmured—outside the human voices rose in disagreement.

"Never should have spoken like that from the pulpit . . ."

"Using the House of God for a soap box . . ."

"England has needed a man like that for a long time."

"Never thought to hear such words in church."

"He's right, you know."

"He's terribly at fault."

"He's wrong."

"He's right."

"He's wrong."

"He's right."

Geraldine's eyes were alight. "Now something will have to be done," she said softly. "Let's get away, Peter, I want to talk. I want to talk

about it. It's too wonderful. The voice crying in the wilderness. How can a man think of his soul when his body is covered with lice? God bless the Bishop for his Godlike good sense!"

Charlie Soames hurried towards them. "Wasn't it wonderful?" he said, waving his hat about like a flail. "That'll make 'em sit up. And 'ee knew what 'ee was talking about. T.B. Lice. Plaster. Oh, this is a great day, Mr. 'Eatherstead, a great day. I never thought I'd feel so glad about anything until the Armistice was signed."

Peter Heatherstead smiled slowly. "This is another declaration of war, Soames," he reminded him. "There will be no peace coming from this, but more conflict."

"Good conflict," said Charlie stoutly, "fine conflict. We'll make 'em move now. I would like to come and see you, sir, if you and your lady would make it convenient."

"You can come whenever you like," said Geraldine. "I am going to write to the Bishop."

"I'd forgotten," Charlie nodded, "you know' im, don't you, m'm?"

"Yes," said Geraldine, "I have that privilege, and I am going to see him."

They were all standing in the covered porch. Gradually they drifted down, out into the sunshine, together, talking. Peter Heatherstead and Geraldine, Charlie Soames and his wife.

Behind them moved a tall figure—a woman. An old woman wrapped in costly old-fashioned sables. The woman, attended by an even older woman who was seemingly her maid, moved slowly and deliberately in the wake of the foursome who talked together so eagerly.

At the lich-gate the Soames and the Heathersteads parted. Charlie and his wife moved stolidly off down the hill, Geraldine touched her husband's sleeve, said, "Wait here, darling, while I get your chair," and went off alone over the grass to where the chair was berthed. Peter leaned against the low stone wall.

It was then that the old woman halted, bent her head to the little withered attendant, said something, and the maid, nodding obediently, trotted off behind Geraldine.

"Ma'am, oh, ma'am," said a small, breathless voice.

Peter, who was leaning over watching the people on the roadway, was oblivious of what was happening.

Geraldine turned. The little figure in rusty black was pursuing her.

"Do you want me?" Geraldine asked, pausing.

"Yes, ma'am, if you please, ma'am."

Geraldine waited until her pursuer drew level.

"Are you Mrs. Heatherstead, ma'am?"

"Yes," said Geraldine, "I am."

"Well, ma'am, my mistress says her compliments and will you be so good as to spare her a moment?"

Geraldine smiled. "Of course I will. Who is your mistress?"

The little creature looked obstinate. "My mistress said she would

explain to you herself if you would be so good as to come to the 'Crown Hotel' at four o'clock this afternoon. 'Tis to do with your housing."

Geraldine's eyes were curious. "My housing?" she repeated.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Very well," said Geraldine, "I will come. But will you not tell me whom I am to ask for?"

"No, ma'am. My mistress will explain, and I will be waiting to take you to her room."

"Then," said Geraldine, totally mystified, "I will come to the 'Crown Hotel' at four o'clock. Are you sure that is all you have to tell me?"

"Yes, ma'am." The wisp of age sketched a rag of a curtsy, turned about without further speech, and trotted back over the grass. Some way down the road she joined the tall, sabled figure. "She's a-coming." she said breathlessly, "like you said."

* * * * *

Frowning a little over the problem, Geraldine collected her husband's chair, wheeled it back, and told him what had occurred.

"If you ask me," he said, "it's another appeal for help. Probably from one of the hotel servants who has a relative housed in squalor somewhere and they're too scared of their place to speak in public."

"Well, then," objected Geraldine, "if that were so why rendezvous at the 'Crown,' where it would be most dangerous, and why refer to the person who wishes to see me as 'my mistress'."

"Yes, that does complicate matters. Well, it can't be anything very dreadful, my darling, and you'll very soon know. In the meantime, let us talk more about the Bishop's speech. I think it was absolutely wonderful."

* * * * *

When luncheon was over, Geraldine wrote to the Bishop, and in the morning she saw that the speech was front-page news. But before this, she kept her mysterious appointment at the 'Crown Hotel' at four o'clock, where, as she had said she would be, the small maid waited, now in a white cap and apron, in the red-carpeted, rather gloomy lounge, and saying simply, "Good afternoon, ma'am, will you, please, to follow me," turned and led the way up the shallow oak stairs and along a narrow corridor. Then she scratched upon the door and, opening it, stood aside to let Geraldine pass.

"Come in, Mrs. Heatherstead," said Theodora Dingleby.

* * * * *

Geraldine advanced slowly into the room. There was no expression of conflict, nor recognition, nor dislike in her clear, grey eyes. Only a faintly impersonal curiosity. "How do you do?" she said to Theodora, and paused, hesitant, awaiting her name.

The figure in the large chair said, "You don't know me?" and it was a question which vibrated with some subtle amusement.

"No," said Geraldine, "should I?"

And at this query Theodora began to laugh. The laughter wrinkled and seamed into a thousand tiny lines the carefully painted mask upon her face; the elaborate incrustation of Elizabeth Arden, over expensive massage, over old age, that had been unsparing in youth. The ruin of a face in which only the eyes were young. Still young—remarkably, vitally, with a tinge of red light in their depths. Theodora had broadened and thickened, too, but with her flowing gown, unfashionably long, determinedly individual, the illusion of increased height offset the added flesh. Her hair was dyed, carefully, expensively, but dyed, and the metallic darkness, glinting with henna, had all the appearance of a good wig. Her hands were superb. They were stretched along the arms of her chair. Blue-white, transparent, and darker-blue veined in a delicate, idle beauty which lost nothing by its age. The diamonds which Alaric had bought still blazed on her left hand, other diamonds also, and one superlative emerald set in platinum. The nails on her fingers were flaring red—oval, tapering, and crimson. Geraldine glanced, fascinated, at the painted hands. Then Theodora spoke and the rumbling laughter died in her withered throat.

"I'm your aunt, my dear, Theodora Dingleby, the woman who left 'Laurelston' the morning after your Aunt Amelia died and . . . and your grandmother broke her neck."

The two women were a strange contrast. Theodora, more, not less, flamboyant than she had been as Miss La Valle, but so sure, so poised, so incredibly contained and controlled and dominant that the vulgarities of her appearance suggested eccentricity rather than cheap theatricalism. And Geraldine . . . pale, slender, compassionate, with her curving, tender mouth and her sad, clear eyes and her own utter fearlessness which in a manner matched her opponent.

Now she went straight to the core of their meeting, ignoring the subterfuge of "something to do with housing." "Why did you send for me?" she asked.

Theodora was enjoying herself. Of what her pleasure was composed it was impossible to judge. If there was a flavour of evil in its composition it was invisible to Geraldine.

"Sit down," she said to Geraldine, "the woman shall bring us tea. Do you smoke?"

"Yes," said Geraldine.

Theodora rapped on the woodwork of the chair with her knuckles and the maid came in from a connecting door which disclosed a bedroom. "Cigarettes," said Theodora.

While the maid fetched them, handed them, lit them, there was silence. This, too, Theodora appeared to enjoy. Then, inhaling luxuriously, she began.

"I hear that you are interested in slums?" and the still present amusement flushed a little pool of quick colour to Geraldine's cheeks.

"Are you?" she countered.

"Oh, yes, in my own way, I am. That was a fine speech the Bishop inserted in his sermon, was it not?"

"I thought so," said Geraldine. Now suddenly she was on her guard, though she had no idea what she was defending. "But I feel sure you did not send for me to tell me that."

The red lights danced in Theodora's eyes. "No, I did not. But it is relevant." She leaned back in her chair and regarded Geraldine slowly. "You are not a Dingleby," she stated.

"No—not altogether. I am half a Foote. Did you ever know my father?"

"Never. I only met your mother once. At Sir Josiah's funeral."

A faint coldness touched Geraldine as if all the old vibrations of those experiences which Theodora had shared were rippling through the room.

Then, "Why is your husband crippled?" Theodora asked.

Geraldine explained.

"I hope you don't imagine I am being unnecessarily intrusive," said Theodora, after Geraldine had finished, "but I am trying to obtain a clear picture. Trying to discover why you should be so interested in slumming." The still-present questioning was in her words, as if to her nature it was alien to meet such reactions. "But before we return to that," she continued, "let me do a little explaining. I have come here in the hope that my visit will pass unnoticed . . . by persons whom I do not care to meet. Mr. Proberty (I know that you and he are friends) is still my legal adviser." Here she smiled a little. "A very stubborn, persistent little man Mr. Proberty. After many years of failure, he still persists in trying to persuade me to sell my Easterbridge houses."

"I did not know you owned any," said Geraldine. "Is it possible that . . .?"

Theodora held up a painted hand. "Slowly, slowly, my dear," she said, "let me continue with my tale. I have refused Mr. Proberty, as your grandmother refused him, and your Aunt Amelia, and your Uncle Alaric." She shrugged her shoulders. "I have seen no reason to do otherwise. Confidentially, I was not interested. Now in certain circumstances I might revise my attitude. We shall see."

Geraldine's eyes were fixed upon her unswervingly. She was now aware that no imaginings of her peopled the room with strange echoes. They were there, in great strength.

Theodora went on, "I would like to know what has happened to Alaric. Proberty also remains constant to his immense discretions, and it is not agreeable to me to set questions in train locally."

Something of her repellence for Alaric crept into Geraldine's eyes.

"I have only met your . . . er . . . Mr. Dingleby once."

"When was that?" Theodora leaned forward with swift eagerness.

"At my wedding," Geraldine faltered. "He came, uninvited. There was a scene."

Theodora shook with silent laughter. "I find that easy to believe. And then?"

"He left the house almost immediately. I have never spoken to him."

"What are his circumstances? Do you know?"

"A little," said Geraldine, "but . . ." She hesitated and her words expired.

"But you don't see why I should question you. Well, let me repeat, it concerns my decision regarding those slums. Is Alaric prosperous?"

Geraldine, aware that she was being subtly bludgeoned, made her inward decision and answered her. "No. 'Laurelston' is falling into disrepair, his name is soiled, his reputation terrible."

The painted mask closed in upon itself into a secret blankness. Theodora repeated the words as if to imprint them indelibly upon the tablets of memory. "But he still will not sell his houses?"

"That is what Mr. Proberty gives me to understand."

"Have you approached him?"

"Oh, no." All her horror of the man was in Geraldine's quick answer.

"I see." Theodora regarded her hands intently. After a long pause she looked up.

"Very well," she said, and she seemed to have gained stature until she filled the room, "persuade Alaric to sell you those houses and you may have mine also," and as she finished speaking a wave of intense weariness, intense age, spread over her painted face. The remainder of her words came slowly through her lips, "Communicate . . . communicate with me through Proberty . . . Maria will show you out." She lay back in her chair with her eyes closed. She was quite still.

Maria came at that instant through the connecting door, whispered, "This way if you please, ma'am," and opened the door giving on to the corridor.

Geraldine rose. She looked down at the still figure. Suddenly the idea flashed into her mind that Theodora had encompassed her wishes without a single word of personal relation, of friendship, or of consideration. That by her present pose she even evaded the necessity of farewell. Behind the defence of withered weariness, Geraldine was sure that those fierce, young eyes were couched, vital, aware, and burning, and that when the door closed behind her the figure would become animated instantly, to the completion of a purpose which was entirely beyond her comprehension.

She nodded to the maid, went out of the room, and heard the door close behind her and the key turn as she went down the corridor.

* * * * *

There was a small civil war in the town of Easterbridge. Following upon the speech, people took sides. As there were Fascists and anti-Fascists, so there were those who were for the Bishop and those who were against him. Geraldine privately named them the "Villains" and the "Crusaders," and laughed to herself when she saw stout, fussy aldermen with stupid faces and commercial minds and realized that they were her "villains."

She went probing about the town. She visited the Editor of the Easterbridge paper and listened while he talked. She heard from him that letters of protest were coming into his office daily—letters from the

owners of the property under dispute. She learned that it was true that strong forces were at work now, more than ever, to hold back the Sanitary Inspector's report. When the Editor agreed to publish any letter she might send to him, she went away gratefully and wrote of what she had seen, confirming, in her small degree, the conditions which the Bishop had witnessed, but not only citing present-day instances, but going back to her girlhood and the days of the last war. She stated that she was willing to repeat her statements personally at any time and to any person interested. She signed her name and her husband's with his full agreement.

Then the day came when she received a reply to her letter to the Bishop. He named a day and time and expressed himself ready and willing to see her. She went, and she told him what she knew.

The Bishop's house in Shoal was very large. The garden was large, too, and although flowering shrubs bloomed lushly and the borders were reasonably neat, there was a general air of neglect about the once lovely garden which suggested that the occupants of the house did not regard a staff of gardeners as necessary in time of war.

As she followed the secretary through the corridors of the large house, Geraldine saw again that ineradicable memory which she had of the man she was to see again. That picture of him standing in the pulpit, with his hands pressed down and his body bent forward, telling his congregation about the squalors of their town. He was a big man, very tall, very broad, with a wide, humorous face, a mouth chiselled into lines of compassion and understanding by his own inward humanities and his own outward experiences. His hair was white, his eyes ageless and yet his personality irradiated a pliancy and youngness of heart which nullified the lines on his face and the changed colour of his hair. There was a spring to his step, a quickness of movement which was the echo of all his years of active interests.

Geraldine went into the spacious drawing-room, sat down, and waited. Presently he came.

He came in in his purple cassock, a great dominant figure that seemed to fill the room. He hitched himself into a chair, proffered cigarettes, lit one for his guest, and inhaled his own gratefully. "You mustn't mind if we are interrupted," he said cheerfully. "We are short-staffed, overworked, and I have to catch a train in a couple of hours. So you were interested in what I said? I'm sorry there is no fire—it is chilly this morning—but my wife is saving coal. We are very short, and the staff question is a problem, too, these days."

"Are you short of servants?" said Geraldine.

The Bishop laughed. "No, we're not short, we haven't any. Nannie, who is getting too old, and my wife run this house between them. At least, they don't run the whole house, because it is, of course, ridiculously large. We live in a flat—made up of part of the house. Much more practicable!"

Geraldine wondered, privately, if Bishops ever helped with the dusting —had a sudden impulse to tell him, tried to suppress a twinkle, and then told him, and was rewarded with an answering laugh.

"My wife doesn't allow me," he told her. "She watches over me with anxious care. I tell her she spares me too much. When I see how my clergy work, Mrs. Heatherstead, I am humbled. My simple, unobtrusive clergy. They are wonderful men, believe me!"

"Mr. Paley," she told him, "has been a friend of mine for many years."

"Ah, yes, of course—nice fellow, Henry, very nice fellow. You must know the Denbeighs." He slid for a moment into an exchange of mutual acquaintances. Swung the cross which hung down over his robe to and fro between his fingers.

Geraldine began to broach her subject. "May I ask a question, please?"

"You may."

"Why did you decide to make that speech in the middle of your sermon?"

He flung back his head and laughed. "I was practically threatened not to," he told her. Then his face became grave. "Stupid—to me. Don't you think?"

"Of course. What are you going to do now?"

"Exercise every fragment of authority that is mine to see that conditions are improved with the least possible delay."

"Do you know that there are certain people who are trying to suppress the Sanitary Inspector's report?"

"No, I did not."

He thought a moment. Stubbed out his cigarette. Lit another. "Do you know any of the owners of those houses?"

"Yes. Do you?"

"Some, not all. I would like to know them all."

"Would it be of service to you to have a list?"

His eyes were intent upon her. "Of great service. Have you such a list?"

She brought it from her bag. She held it out to him. "I obtained it from the Rates Officer. Perfectly legally. Every ratepayer is entitled to have access to the Rates Book if they so wish. I wished. And I collected from the Rates Book all the names not already known to me."

"Have you any particular reason for wanting to engage yourself in this matter?"

"Yes," she said quietly, "I have."

"Then perhaps." He stopped, swinging the cross and became very tranquil with the exquisite attention that makes great men into great listeners. "Then perhaps you will tell me."

"Yes," said Geraldine. "If I may I will." She began to talk, and while she talked, the Bishop watched her, smoking cigarettes, occasionally slipping a question into the web of her narrative. She told him of Prudence Lester who had married Charles Heatherstead. She went back and told him of the Dinglebys and the wasted efforts that had been made through the years to persuade Alaric and his sister and mother to sell their properties or to give them some care and attention. She spoke of Peter and her own marriage and the plans and hopes which had been arrested by illness and pain. She told him of May Burrage, the incestuous whore; of

Perce Sedge, the petty criminal; of Polly Sedge, who had died of tuberculosis.

She went on to talk of the Soamses. She spoke of Charles Heatherstead's convictions regarding environment. Finally, she told of her interview with Theodora Dingleby and the proposition which had been made. She saw the keen eyes of her listener narrow and the white head nod vigorously.

Without her being aware of any deliberate intent, Geraldine found that she was led back to speak in more detail of her knowledge of Alaric Dingleby.

"You say he has been approached often?" asked the Bishop.

"Oh, yes. For many years old Mr. Proberty tried constantly to persuade each one of them to do something."

"With no success?"

"None whatsoever. On the last occasion Alaric became abusive, I believe."

"I see. Would you mind telling me what your relations with Mr. Dingleby have been, Mrs. Heatherstead?"

"Not at all. I have only met him once. He came uninvited to my wedding and there was a scene."

"Is he an old man now?"

"A very old man. Why, he looked old when he came to my wedding! He was older than mother, you know. He must be over seventy."

"There is always the possibility," mused the Bishop, "that he may have suffered a change of heart."

It was then that Geraldine knew what she must expect.

The Bishop continued. "It would give me immense pleasure, and I believe it might further our cause, if those two hundred houses could change hands and become, say, your property. I hope you won't mind my asking this, but, should they come into the market, could you afford to buy them?"

"Yes," said Geraldine, "I could."

Amusement lit his face suddenly. "I don't think I need to ask you what you would do with them if they became yours."

"No," she smiled back, "I don't think you need. But it's a dream. It would never happen."

"If I did not believe in miracles," said the Bishop dryly. . . . He paused and looked at her. "Well?"

"You want me to go and see him again?"

"Yes, I do. Have one more try. The stakes are high. Mrs. Dingleby would honour her word, I feel, and if we could show that someone was already doing something, repairing, applying for the necessary permits in war-time, taking that extra amount of trouble of which I spoke, surely you can see how much it would help?"

"Yes, I can see. Is that all you want me to do?"

He said, abruptly, rising from his chair and beginning to pace the room with his purple skirts sweeping the carpet, *"I'm not concerned with uplift —I'm concerned with facts.* I want more facts. If you can give them to

me I shall be immeasurably grateful. It is not possible for the clergy to guide towards spiritual and moral security the young people who live in the congestion and squalor of these places. That is why I maintain that the housing problem is first and foremost the Church's business. How can it be otherwise? Yet the whole problem is one which must be handled with infinite care . . . and patience. I am just talking practical politics when I say that it will be at least three years before houses can be rebuilt. And, during that time, what is to happen?

"It may require special legislation for the Town Council to schedule property to be condemned, and to put in, in the meantime, interim repairs and legislate for where it cannot be paid for. In these cases the decisions will have to be taken as to whether it must be met by Government subsidy or extra levying upon the local rates!

"In nineteen thirty a Slum Clearance Act was passed granting two pounds, five shillings per annum for forty years per capita for each person removed from a slum and rehoused. Which actually means for, say, a house of four people, thirteen pounds a year for forty years. Moreover, that Act, still in existence, declares that any house of condemnable character could be replaced by building another house to effect transfer, receiving special subsidy and specially favourable bases per capita."

The Bishop swung round and looked down at his guest. "And yet we have the anomaly of what you and I have seen for ourselves and know exists!"

Geraldine gathered her bag and gloves and stood up.

"I will go and see Alaric Dingleby," she said. "Thank you very much indeed for seeing me. If I become the owner of those houses I will let you know immediately, then perhaps," she paused and smiled, "you will give me your support in getting the permits through to do the necessary work?"

The Bishop held out his hand. "I will come and help you with the work," he said, smiling, "if you can persuade my wife to allow me."

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN Geraldine returned from her visit to the Bishop, Sheila and Henry Paley were sitting with Peter in the study. The Reverend Henry Paley was sitting on the carpet making toast. Peter was laughing at something that had just been said and Sheila was pouring out the tea. The room was filled with friendliness and the familiarity of close friendships. It was warm and welcoming and safe.

"What did he say?" asked Peter eagerly, leaning forward in his chair, his thin face animated into a sudden appearance of improved health.

Geraldine laughed. "Give me a chance, darling, let me get my breath. I've hurried home to tell you. I feel rather like a small girl that's been set a holiday task which will overshadow my pleasures until it is completed."

"He's given you something to do?"

She grimaced. "Something very unpleasant. I have to go and see Alaric Dingleby."

Henry Paley and his wife looked at her incredulously. Only Peter was not surprised. "I might have expected that. Well, tell us all about it."

Henry Paley burst into a pæan of praise. "Oh, he's a fine man. A true servant of God. A man who comes into my room and says, 'Give me a cigarette and a chair, Paley,' and who clasps my hand in strong friendship. No limp-fingered handshake of keep your distance. He's human, friendly, lovable!"

Geraldine held up her hands. "Henry, dear, I agree with you—entirely. But he's given me a nasty job, hasn't he?"

Peter said at once, "When will you go, Geraldine?"

She sipped her tea reflectively. "That's what I don't know. I don't know how to go either. I don't know whether to write and ask him to see me. What," she wondered, "do you think he will throw at me this time?"

"From all accounts," said Sheila reassuringly, "his throwing days are over."

"What accounts?" Geraldine asked. "I have never heard any."

"Possibly not. But there have been plenty. He has never been one to hide his light under a bushel. Of course, I don't know very much, only idle gossip about his excesses which have worn him to a shadow. If you want to know any of the really ancient history, ask Rose."

"Rose!" Geraldine looked astonished. "What has she got to do with it? What can she possibly know?"

"Quite a lot, I should imagine," said Henry, "considering she was in service at 'Laurelston' when Lady Dingleby died."

Geraldine put down her cup and saucer. "Peter, did you know this?" she demanded.

"Yes," said Peter. "We kept it from you at the time we engaged Rose because we were afraid of your reactions. Then, to be perfectly frank, I, for one, forgot about it."

"All those years," she mused, "all my curiosities, and all the time Rose, who was a witness to those things, was living in the house! I wonder if I mind not having been told? I can't tell. In a way, I don't think I do. I can at least examine the whole thing subjectively now."

"If Rose will talk," commented Peter.

"Do you think she will refuse?"

"She might. Rose is a strange woman. I have a theory, rightly or wrongly, that Rose knows far more of what went on in that house than any of us can guess."

"Then," said Geraldine, "I shall ask her now."

"At least," said Sheila tranquilly, "you can postpone your inquisition until we have left. I am sure, after all these years, you can wait a little longer, and I am positive Rose will not unburden herself in front of us."

"Nor in here," Geraldine agreed, looking round the room. "Too much of us, too much of Uncle Charles in here. I'll go into the kitchen."

"What do you expect to gain by talking to Rose?" inquired Peter.

"That's a funny question." She looked at her husband with surprise. "Why do you ask that?"

"Answer me, Gerry, please."

"Well, it's difficult to say all at once, just like that. You see, really, all my basic dislike of Alaric springs from what I have heard from Uncle Charles, who only met him casually in the street, Aunt Prudence, who got it from mummy who was not in the house when the majority of these dreadful things happened, and, generally speaking, second or third-hand gossip. Rose was in the house. If she confirms all the things I have heard, if she condemns him as he has been condemned elsewhere, then I shall feel more reconciled with my conscience for having been such a chilly relative."

"Good God," exclaimed Peter, "surely you don't need more than your own mother's story of what went on when she went down for the funeral!"

A funny little smile twisted Geraldine's lips. "The only thing that mother had proof of was that Alaric had his current mistress staying in the house. A ghastly thing, I agree, and an act of almost unbelievable callousness, but you must remember that to me the sins of the flesh are the least of sins."

"What about Theodora?"

"Theodora only walked out," she reminded him, "with fifty thousand pounds. All I can add to that, having met her, is that no one would ever know what she either thought or felt unless she desired that they should do so."

"That's true, certainly. Well, how about the houses?"

"You fall down on the houses, surely?" said Henry Paley.

"I have never approached him," she said stubbornly.

"But look at the people who have approached him."

"I still want proof," she persisted, "and I blame myself for not having gone after it."

"I should hardly have thought you could level that accusation against yourself," said Henry.

She turned on him. "Can you absolve me wholly?" she demanded.

"Perhaps not altogether."

She nodded. "You see! Nor can I. But I shall be able to say I have done everything in my power once I have seen him."

Sheila Paley reached out and touched Geraldine on the sleeve. "You go, Gerry," she said. "I wouldn't have the courage to go myself. But if you can, you go. Our prayers will go with you."

* * * * *

Rose was darning socks in the kitchen. She sat in the old basket-chair by the kitchen range, her thin body poised erectly in the wide chair, the vast tortoiseshell cat asleep at her feet.

"Don't get up, Rose," said Geraldine, coming into the room and closing

the door behind her. "I want to talk to you. Not about household matters. About something quite different."

A tremor vibrated the withered mask of Rose's tired face. "You've been a long time asking me, ma'am," she said flatly.

Geraldine sat down facing her maid, picked up the cat, and began ruffling his dappled coat. "Then you know what I want to say?"

"Yes'm, I think I do. All the years I have been here I have waited for you to ask me."

"About 'Laurelston'?"

"Yes'm, about 'Laurelston.'"

"Am I right in saying that you would rather it was never mentioned?"

"Yes, m'm."

"Was it so dreadful?"

"No, m'm. It isn't that. Nothink was dreadful by comparison, as you might say, with the years I was married to that man. But it was . . . nasty."

Geraldine watched her intently. She told her why she wished to know. She explained her visit to the Bishop, his request that she return to Alaric and see if his viewpoint had changed. . . . When she said, "In case he has experienced a change of heart. . . ." Rose shook her head several times slowly, and looked like a Yogi priest in a woman's habit.

"He couldn't, m'm." The words came out very gradually, as if the memory that fed them was rusty with disuse. "He never had no heart, as you might say. He wasn't right in the head. I was kitchen-maid there when I was fourteen. Mrs. Blossom was housekeeper, Mr. Bilson the butler. That was when Sir Josiah was alive. Mr. Alaric was in the theatre. He never come out of it. He play-acted all the time, and if he was believed he was happy, but if he wasn't believed, or if anyone crossed him he went like a madman. It was like as if he was never more'n about four and spoilt at that. Tantrums was what he had. Like a child. That's how he stayed. Like a child." She peered back with weary eyes down the corridors of recollection. "Sir Josiah was hasty, you know. Threw things. Lady Dingleby, well, I think, m'm, in a small way she was with him like I was with . . . that man I married. Too frightened to do anythink. Frightened all the time. Women who have never known men like that don't understand. It's a kind of fear that creeps into your bones and makes them like jelly, so's you bend all the time inside you instead of standing up straight. There was always quarrels. Everyone quarrelled with everyone else, and after Sir Josiah passed over Mr. Alaric got worse."

"What about Theodora?" asked Geraldine breathlessly.

"She was a deep one, m'm. Ever so deep. I never know. There was talk, of course, in the kitchen. She give Lady Dingleby brandy all right."

"There have been things said." Geraldine found difficulty with her words.

"I know, m'm," Rose agreed. "I couldn't say in fairness, though, if they was right. Mebbe they was. She 'ad 'er ladyship under 'er thumb. And she give her brandy. I don't know no more."

Geraldine bent forward. "Are you quite sure, Rose?"

For an instant, fear flickered in the old woman's eyes . . . then it died. "No," she persisted, "I'm not sure, m'm. And it isn't never right to speak when you are not sure."

"What will happen, do you think, when I go to see him?"

Rose shook her head. "Nothink, m'm. Leastways, nothing but a scene."

* * * * *

The words were an echo which shook themselves out against the walls of Geraldine's mind and threw them back incessantly. As she went out of the house the following morning they rang around her head. "Nothing —leastways, nothing but a scene."

She walked down the street, nodded to acquaintances, left a list at the grocers, continued on her way, and still the words reminded her, "Nothing —leastways, nothing but a scene."

Anticipation cramped her mind, excluding all other thoughts. The mental fears for her coming experience dominated her nerves and made her feel sick. The muscles of her stomach cramped with actual physical pain. When she came to the house she paused and stood for several minutes under the toppling shadows of the untrimmed evergreens. They were a tangle of unkempt dead wood, laced with the life which still thrust through the neglect. The grasses at the edge of the gates were long and straggling, dandelions bushing among the blades of green. She went on pushing her way through the gate, which had no fastening. The post had sagged and rotted and the drive was ridged with the grooves of many thrustings where the mud collected and made a boggy streak across the weed-thick gravel.

The house brooded over the garden. The paths had gone, obscured by the encroachments of the lawns. The flower-beds had tangled with green, and the whole was run together into a mass of seeded dereliction. Thin tentacles of suckers grown sturdy with the years waved and stirred where roses had once bloomed. The withered, blackened lupin stems and hollyhock and Michaelmas daisies stifled the new shoots which laboured upwards. Frail seeded antirrhinums were scattered everywhere.

It was a house of ghosts—ghosts of bright flowers, ghosts of attendant gardeners, and, in the toppling stables, ghosts of horses, carriages and coachmen.

Dogs bayed invisibly as Geraldine went up the rutted drive. Their sounds were vibrant, as if they called from empty rooms. She shivered but she went on. There was a gap in the stone steps before the front door. Like a set of battered teeth, they gaped at her. Behind the crumbling stonework refuse had collected: mildewed newspapers, an old tin, a boot.

The doorknocker was scaled with rust. When she struck it against the blistered woodwork and heard the sound rolling through the house, a flake of plaster dislodged from the portico above her head. It floated down and settled on her shoulder. A voice sounded, competing with the dogs, "Down Tanya, down Cerebus, shut your row, God damn your souls," then a chain rattled, the door opened, and he disclosed himself.

Instantly a line flickered across her memory, ousting the phrase which had haunted her on her journey, "Buried alive for eighteen years"—the message received by Mr. Jarvis Lorry[1] on Shooter's Hill when he journeyed to Dover in the Mail. "Buried alive for eighteen years"—that was what Alaric looked like.

The fingers on the door-ridge were claw-curved, yellow-skinned, brown-dappled. He wore a scarlet robe stained with snuff, morocco slippers, and his fez. He clutched the robe across his lean middle. He did not seem to recognize her. She heard her own voice say, "Mr. Dingleby?" saw him nod till the fez lurched over his prawn's eyebrows. The breathing of the dogs in the background was audible. Bulldogs.

"I am Alaric Dingleby," he proclaimed. It was obvious he did not recognize her.

"I am Geraldine Heatherstead—I have come to see you," she said uncertainly.

He seemed delighted.

"My dear child, if you had only told me! After all these years! Coming to visit your old uncle! Your lonely, artist uncle! Ah, genius is sadly neglected in these modern days! But come in, if only I had known that you were coming. We poor neglected bachelors need warning before we are prepared to receive ladies," and he leered as he stood back and bowed over the side of the door.

Geraldine stepped over the rubber mat marked "PLAYERS," and the door swung shut behind her. Alaric's robe fell apart with the force of his bow, disclosing soiled striped trousers and a filthy singlet. The hall stank of dogs and urine.

Instinctively she looked for the gilt clock with the prancing horses, of which so much had been told. It was gone. The frayed carpet on the floor was stained and filthy. There was a deal table stacked with old magazines, a harpsichord, with no keys, and two kitchen chairs.

"I am a cave-dweller," Alaric told her, gathering the fronts of his robe together. "I lurk in solitude upon the first floor; my cave in this mountain of a house. Will you permit me to lead the way?"

He went up the ragged stairs talking without pause. "Never let it be said that a Dingleby turned a guest away from his door! If the furnishings are now humble, the welcome is warm. I am truly delighted at the honour you do me. We shall share a glass of wine together in my studio. I do not need to ask you if you take wine. All the Dinglebys appreciate the juice of the grape."

He was standing upon the top step, the step from which his mother had toppled drunkenly to break her neck. This Geraldine remembered. Only he forgot, with the familiar comfort which his insensibilities gave him.

"And how have you been all these years?" (He did not wait for her to tell him.) "I have been moderately successful. Not perhaps as this world ranks success. But in the years to come perhaps, who knows,

1. *A Tale of Two Cities*—Charles Dickens.

posterity may reward me? That" (he pointed to his left), "that was your Aunt Theodora's bedroom—a fine woman. God, how she treated me!" He pulled off the fez in order that he might clap one hand to his head. "No one could know what I have suffered. Is your husband dead? I lost a dear friend of mine the other day. Never remembered me in his will. Ah, the ingratitude! I hope you are left comfortable."

"My husband is alive, I thank you," gasped Geraldine.

"Ah, yes—ah, yes, you must see my paintings. My works of art. A little girl once told me, 'You will be great one day, Alaric—yes, you will be great." She was a pretty little thing—too thin, though—no hips. We Dinglebys like fleshly women."

He looked disparagingly at Geraldine's slim figure and impelled her into his study.

"You look as if you could do with a bit of fattening up. I had a fine figure, of course. Slender, you know. I shall never lose that slenderness now. How the gallery loved me, and the stalls, of course!"

He grasped a chair-back, slithered the pile of books which lay upon the seat on to the floor, said, "Sit down, I will get wine," and picked his way across the room.

The disorder had become chaos. It was like the litter of a second-hand furniture shop which had been ransacked by burglars and lived in by a rag-and-bone merchant. Alaric had reverted to his ancestry. The smell was overpowering.

For a man who needed no conversational assistance, Geraldine was the perfect guest. Utterly bemused at her reception, nauseated by the odours, rendered incredulous by the disorder, she sat, upright and entranced, on the battered red satin chair and tried to reassemble thought.

Alaric dragged a bottle from beneath the day-bed, now layered with innumerable rags and shawls and curtains, like the nest of a gigantic rat, wiped out two Woolworth glasses with a bandana, and poured out the wine. "Freeman's best cooking port," the label said.

"To our family," he said, handing her a glass. "To our reunion. To you, my dear—come, now, drink up."

Geraldine sipped her cooking port. Alaric drained his and refilled the glass, dropping some on to the table where it settled upon the dust. He then slopped down into a bamboo chaise-longue, smacked his lips, and began to talk.

"I always felt it was that old man Heatherstead who was behind that business on your wedding day," he began. "Never did like the chappie, oh, no—don't you say anything—I know human nature, you'd never be the one to do a thing like that." His eyes clouded with moisture.

"Yes, but . . ."

"Never mind the buts—'but me no buts, uncle me no uncles'—ha, very apt, very apt—know your Shakespeare, d'you? Well, never mind, I do—enough for two, more than enough—an authority on Shapeskeare, I was—still am, come to that. You should have seen my 'Orsino.' Women round the stage doors in their hundreds. Old Leventhall—one of the greatest actor managers of all time—said to me, 'Old boy, you're wonderful.'

It was a loss to the stage when I left. There's not much left here now of all the glory there used to be. This was a magnificent house once. I've been fleeced, you know. Always was generous. Sensitive, generous, impulsive, that's me; a great heart I have, though I say it myself—pity you never saw my 'Orsino'."

"It was something else I came to see you about to-day," Geraldine interjected.

"Came to see the old man. Local character and all that. Everyone knows Alaric Dingleby." He thrust out his spare chest. "Don't think I don't know. Read you like a book. I'm psychic. Little girl I once knew, she told me, 'Alaric,' she said, 'you've got second sight. Nothing but a beautiful visionary.' I must tell you what I said to Irving—Sir Henry, you know—on that very subject."

Geraldine tried again. "Would you tell me something. . . ."

"Tell you anything." Alaric made an extravagant gesture and spilled the remainder of the cooking port. "Tell you such stories of the theatre, when it *was* the theatre, not the mumbling, mewling make-believe it is to-day. Ah, those good old days! I remember Tree said to me once, 'Dingleby, my dear fellah' . . ."

Geraldine began to wonder if she were experiencing a freely chosen performance or some indigestive nightmare. The words dripped around her. The bulldogs lay snuffling upon the floor. They were malodorous beyond description, and as a large gas fire whistled away in the corner the heat became oppressive. The windows had not been open for years. The falls and drapes of the tattered curtains were ridged with a thick encrustation of dust. It smelt worse, and looked dirtier, than any of the slum houses she had visited.

After nearly three-quarters of an hour of Pelmanism in reverse—a singular demonstration of verbal agility from one irrelevant subject to the next—Alaric became careless and left a gap while he lit a cigar, in which instant Geraldine said purposefully, "I have come to see you for a very particular reason—er—Uncle."

Alaric puffed a cloud of smoke in her face, and, when it cleared, she saw that his face had become crafty and closed. "Not in any money worries, are you?" he said unpleasantly.

"Nothing of the kind, I assure you. You have something that I very much wish to purchase, and if you will give me the opportunity I will give you whatever sum you care to name."

She had become reckless, with the peculiar recklessness of a woman who sees the whole of her purpose foredoomed to failure.

Alaric puffed again. "Something of your mother's, no doubt. Very probably it's sold. I have been forced to realize on my possessions through the years. Told you I have been bled white by harpies. Women!" He clapped his hand to his head and launched into a further disquisition.

"No," said Geraldine when at last he paused for breath, "it is nothing of mother's. It is something which I know is your own."

"You seem very keen to get it, whatever it is," said Alaric sharply, looking down at her interlocked fingers which were trembling.

"I am—very, very anxious indeed."

"Good Lord," he grumbled. "No one ever come to see me without wanting something! Human nature is damnably greedy. If I hadn't my ideals, I should be a very embittered man." This was the cue to set him off again. He began a wondrous version of his Shakespearian and Pageant venture—calculated to set himself off in a good light and blacken his associates.

Geraldine waited with what patience she could muster. At length, with a prayer to back her words, she said desperately, "My husband and I want to give you any price you care to ask for your two hundred houses in Easterbridge."

He leaped from his chair. He trod on one of the bulldogs who snarled viciously. He kicked the animal, dropped his cigar, rubbed it into the carpet with his foot, and began reviling her.

"Who put you up to this?" he snarled, his face livid. "That sneaking, double-crossing swine, Proberty, I'll dare swear. Wants to take them out of my hands, because he knows he's on to a dam' good thing. First he tried to get me to spend money on them so that when he offered for them they'd be in a peak of condition. Then he tried to buy 'em as they were. All his life Proberty's tried to get those houses from me," his voice was mounting perilously, "damned, shifty, twisting devil. Let me tell you, he'll never get 'em. And it's no manner of use sending you here to get 'em for him, and when I'm dead I'll see to it that they are left so that he can never get his hands on them, either."

"It's nothing to do with Mr. Proberty, I assure you," said Geraldine, trying to control her hands.

"Don't you lie to me," screamed Alaric, crashing his hands down on a table-top and sending up clouds of dust. "Don't try to pull the wool over my eyes. I know. What would you want my houses for anyway?"

Geraldine's head came up. "To destroy," she said clearly, "because they are a disgrace to the nation."

"Come here and inveigle your way into my house and then abuse me, will you?" He was ranting now; arms, hands, head, weaving distorted patterns. "Well, it won't do. And calling me names won't get you anywhere."

Geraldine stood up. "I have never had the slightest intention of calling you names. You asked me why I wanted to buy your houses. I told you. Do you know they are ridden with lice, falling into decay, reeking with damp?"

"Damn your bloody interference," he shrieked, a slight foam flecking the corners of his mouth. "Don't you think you can come here with your lies. Get out of my house; go on, get out, get out, get out."

He stood in the middle of the room with his arms lifted above his head. Geraldine picked up her bag and walked towards the door, wondering if her knees would support her.

"Get out," he screamed, dashing after her to the doorway, following her down the passage, "take your blasted cant elsewhere—get out . . . get out . . . get . . ."

The shrieking came after her like poison down the staircase, while she fumbled with the door-latch, while she pulled the unaccountably heavy door open, while she stumbled out and pulled it fast behind her.

She leaned against the blistered paint and wiped the moisture from her upper lip. She was sweating with the horror of her experience. Inside the doors the dogs began to bark. The shrieking voice had silenced. A car ran past the drive gates, otherwise there was peace.

After a long time she put away her handkerchief and went down the drive and so towards her home.

* * * * *

By the time she reached her home, the clamour in her head had stilled. Though her cheeks still burned, she was calmed with the long walk, and her hands were steady.

When she was stopped by a friend, and engaged in trivial conversation, she answered calmly enough. Her horrors had turned inwards and left nothing but pallor upon her face.

Rose opened the door to her, said, "Get you a cup of tea, m'm, I knew it would be like this," and went rustling off to the kitchen. Geraldine went up the stairs to the study and found Peter working.

The rattle of the typewriter ceased as the door clicked behind her. He turned round. "Because," he said carefully, "you look composed and entirely without hope, I presume the interview was dreadful."

"Quite, quite dreadful," she agreed, "I never thought the day would come when I should be thankful that we had had no children."

"Come, now," he said quietly, "it couldn't have been as bad as that."

Geraldine sat down and took off her hat. She sat with it in her lap and stared at the fire. "It was as bad as that. It was worse. He is mad. Quite, quite mad. There's no question of his being just eccentric. There is madness there. I am sure. When he screamed at me there was foam at the corners of his mouth. Just as there was on our wedding day."

"You didn't get the houses? He wouldn't sell?"

"No, he wouldn't sell. He reviled me and poor, dear, good, old Proberty. All his thoughts are distorted. His vision of life and humanity stained by his own beastliness. He sees nothing as it is. Oh, that house, Peter!" She bent forward and stared at the fire. "The smell . . . the filth . . . the decay . . ." She shuddered. "The people in his horrible little houses are cleaner, by far."

"Just what did happen, Gerry?" Peter got up from his chair and joined her by the fire. She told him. When she had finished she drank the tea that Rose brought her, and they were silent for a while.

Finally, she said, "I shall have to write and tell the Bishop that I have failed. I shall have to return to Mrs. Dingleby, if she is still staying at the 'Crown.' You know, Peter, I have a powerful instinct that for some reason we may never discover, Theodora will be very, very angry.

CHAPTER IX

FOR three days Geraldine tried to write her letter to the Bishop. On the third day, when she was sitting in the study, with notepaper and pen on a small table at her elbow by the fireside, and Peter was typing painstakingly behind her, Rose opened the door and ushered Charlie Soames into the room.

"Well, Mr. Soames, this is a surprise," Geraldine smiled. "Come along in and sit down. Peter, dear, here's Mr. Soames."

"Eh?" Peter Heatherstead looked up vaguely. "Oh, hello, Soames. Take a pew. You look very excited. Someone left you a fortune?"

"No, sir." Charlie Soames stood inside the door and looked from one to the other in some embarrassment. "It isn't anything like that."

"What is it, Charlie? Nothing wrong, I hope." Geraldine's voice sharpened suddenly.

"No, m'm, I don't rightly know how to tell you. 'Aven't you seen the paper this morning?"

"What paper?" said Peter. "I've read *The Times.*"

"No, the Easterbridge paper."

"It's here," said Geraldine, reaching for the rack, "we haven't looked at it yet."

"Well, there's something in there, m'm, something you'll be glad to see, and something that won't give you no pleasure."

Geraldine opened the paper.

"What are you reading, m'm?" said Charlie, his stocky figure tense with anticipation. "I did think you'd've known."

Geraldine looked hurriedly through the headlines. "Easterbridge sanitary report . . . is this it, Mr. Soames? Listen, Peter. This is exciting. It is rumoured that the sanitary report, which has long been expected, is to be made public in the near future." She laid down the paper, her eyes alight. "Please sit down, Mr. Soames. This is really good news. First the Bishop's speech and now this; it makes up for my disappointment."

Charlie Soames frowned. "What disappointment may I ask, Mrs. Heatherstead?"

"Sit down and I'll tell you."

Geraldine was puzzled at his apparent discomfort. He looked uncomfortably at a chair, changed his hat over from his left hand to his right, and finally sat down carefully upon the chair-edge.

"As you know," Geraldine began, letting the paper lie idle in her lap, "I went to see the Bishop, but as you do not know, I went afterwards, at his request, to see if I could persuade Mr. Dingleby to sell me the houses he owns."

Charlie dropped his hat. "When did you go?" he said hoarsely.

"Three days ago. Yes, where are we now, Friday; I went on Tuesday. Why?"

Charlie Soames took a large, clean handkerchief from his trousers' pocket and dabbed at his face. "Would you mind telling me what happened, Mrs. Heatherstead?"

"No. There was a scene. Mr. Dingleby refused to sell."

"W-what sort of a scene?"

Geraldine and Peter were looking at him with astonishment. "Well . . ." Geraldine hesitated, "a rather unpleasant scene."

"Oh, dear," said Charlie inadequately.

Peter stretched out his hand. "Geraldine, give me that paper," he said.

Charlie looked at his feet. Geraldine stared. Peter turned over the paper carefully.

"Ah," he said at last, "now I understand."

"Understand what. Have you all gone mad? Is this some ridiculous game?"

"No game, Gerry," said Peter, "but poor old Soames didn't know how to tell you. And I do not blame him for feeling fogged. It's Alaric, my dear. He's dead.

Geraldine repeated the word stupidly.

"Yes." Peter was reading the paragraph swiftly, pruning the salient points. "Found dead by the charwoman who went in yesterday. It seems she only goes in once a week. Must have been dead for some time. Had some sort of stroke. At the top of the stairs."

"At the top of the stairs?" Geraldine whispered. "That was where he stood . . . screaming at me."

"You were the larst to see 'im alive then," said Charlie miserably. "Now there'll be an inquest. I'm ever so sorry Mrs. Heatherstead. I come up to see if there was anything I could do."

Geraldine stared at him. "Thank you, very much indeed," she said mechanically. "I don't think there is much anyone can do. I had better go to the police."

"Police!" said Peter. "Whatever for?"

"I don't think you understand," said Geraldine. "I was the last to see him alive. We quarrelled—there was a scene—he died. It will have to come out."

"Nonsense," said Peter, "you'll go to Proberty. He may be old, but he's the wisest man I know now that Uncle Charles is dead. Go to him, tell him everything, and leave it in his hands. Come to that, I'm feeling very well to-day, I'll come with you."

"I'd be honoured to take Mrs. Heatherstead if you don't feel up to the walk," said Charlie, looking intensely miserable.

"Thank you, Soames," said Peter, "but I think I feel well enough. Besides, this is a grave matter, particularly as Mr. Dingleby was a relative. I shall feel more secure if I talk to Mr. Proberty."

Geraldine shrugged her shoulders with a small gesture of futility. "It's a dreadful situation," she said flatly, "dreadful! We quarrelled. I left the house. He was found dead." The full implication of her own

words reached her suddenly, and she stared in horror at the two men. "There's no knowing what might happen."

"Then," said her husband, "the sooner we find out the better it will be for all of us. It's the anticipation which is so appalling."

The door opened suddenly and Rose came in. "I heard the news, ma'am," she said, standing clasping her fingers together until the worn skin strained. "The milkman told me. I came in to tell you, ma'am, that I shall be glad to speak, if there is need."

"Of what, Rose?" Geraldine said sharply.

"Of Mr. Dingleby, ma'am. I knew what his temper was. We all said that's how he would go . . . one day. I've seen his temper. I never thought the day would come when I would be glad I had worked in that house."

"I see," said Geraldine. "You mean . . .?"

"He killed 'imself with his own horrible temper. All you have to do is tell what happened. Then I can tell what I knew."

"I'm going to Mr. Proberty, Rose—now."

Rose nodded. "And I'll come with you. Mr. Proberty will be glad to hear what I have to say. I don't know that there's anyone else alive as could tell him. If you wait here, m'm, I'll bring down your coat and hat and get my own."

She returned in her outdoor clothes. Geraldine dressed in silence. Then they all went out together.

* * * * *

A week later the Easterbridge paper was again delivered to the Heatherstead's house, together with *The Times* and the *Daily Mirror* for Rose. She gathered all three papers together and carried them into the kitchen. In her opinion her mistress had been "through enough already," and it was her intention to study the newspaper reports before taking them upstairs. The *Daily Mirror,* splashing the front page with details of the ever-increasing air attack on Germany, ignored the death of Alaric Dingleby entirely. The two national papers were of precisely the same mind. *The Times* was not interested either, but under the black lettering, "Inquest on Mr. Alaric Dingleby," a full column ran down to the bottom of the front page of the local paper.

Rose spread out the paper on the kitchen table, hitched up her steel spectacles which slid about on her nose like a novice on an ice-rink, and began to read, tracing each line of print with her forefinger, which gradually progressed down the page.

". . . On Wednesday last," Rose learned afresh, " a coroner's jury, presided over by Mr. Leonard Stubbs, returned a verdict of accidental death. Miss Rose Cottle, giving evidence on her knowledge of the deceased, stated that the deceased was subject even in youth to fits of ungovernable temper. . . . Mrs. Heatherstead, the deceased's niece, said that on the day on which the deceased died she visited him. . . . Mrs. Heatherstead told the jury that as a result of a request which she made to the deceased he became very angry and subsequently began to scream.

He ordered Mrs. Heatherstead to leave the house. This she did. When she last saw the deceased he was standing at the top of the main staircase screaming. It was here that the body was found. Mr. Laing, who performed the post-mortem examination, told the jury that death was due to cerebral hæmorrhage.

"After the jury had returned their verdict, Mr. Stubbs thanked Mrs. Heatherstead for the frank and clear manner in which she had given her evidence. Mr. Stubbs said that the deceased was a very violent man, who at his advanced age was unable to support the strain of his emotions. He added that Mrs. Heatherstead was in no way concerned with his death. . . ."

When she had read every word, gone back and reread her own name in print, and finally refolded the papers carefully, Rose tucked them under her arm and went up the stairs to the study.

"I'm going to read those papers before you do, Geraldine," said Peter calmly, as Rose carried them in. "Give them to me, please, Rose. I think, madam, has had sufficient trouble in the past few days."

"Madam," said Geraldine, looking up from her letters, "is becoming immune to trouble. It's the first forty years that are the worst, so they say. As I am now past my fortieth birthday, very little can surprise me, nothing can shock me, and I can endure a considerable amount of discomfort."

"There's nothing in the papers that's not right and fitting for madam to read," said Rose, obeying her instructions.

Peter twinkled. "How do you know, Rose?"

"I've read 'em, sir, before I brought 'em up. I was of the same mind myself."

"That was nice of you?" he said. "Shall I read you the report of the inquest, Gerry?"

"No, thank you," she said, "I don't wish to hear it. Am I publicly absolved from attempted murder?"

"Oh, yes. They have let you down extremely gently, really. I wonder what it is old Proberty wants to see us about?"

Rose finished clearing away the breakfast things and went out with the heavy tray.

"You never told me that he wanted to see us."

"I'm sorry, I forgot. He asked me as we were coming out of Court on Wednesday. He said, 'May I drop in on you and your wife some time on Friday morning? I have a small matter to discuss.' "

"I wonder what it can be. You know, Peter, I cannot get used to the idea that Alaric Dingleby is really dead. All my life—at least, since I was a girl—I have moved about this town expecting to see his ridiculous figure come flapping at me round some corner, and now I feel that he will still flap, given sufficient time."

"He could never become a ghostly visitant," said Peter, "not enough strength of character. His ego was altogether too small—unless he became a poltergeist."

"One of those elementals that threw furniture about and hide things?"

"That's right."

"Oh, it isn't fair to speak of him like that, now that he's dead."

"Nonsense," said her husband, ramming tobacco into his pipe with great vehemence. "There's a great deal too much of the *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* stuff. Why, just because a man is out of range of criticism should his sins be ignored and his virtues magnified? I don't believe it. Dingleby was a rotter. He was selfish and egotistical and mean. Three horrid characteristics. Why we should not pass judgment upon him, I fail to see. Except upon the ordinary grounds that precious few of us are equipped to pass judgment upon any of our fellows."

"Then let's leave it at that," said Geraldine. "We've all been very sweeping about this war, and the last; we've been quick to heap the blame on the politicians, the financiers; precious slow, though, by comparison, to admit that each one of us individually has contributed to the tragic whole. I let my personal ideals slide because I preferred to take care of you, but I could have done more. Now I am thankful for every moment I spent with you. You're better in health than you have ever been since you came back from France; you're becoming a name in the world of letters. You see . . . all selfish . . . really."

"The hardest thing in the world to do," said Peter, "is in my opinion to serve those one dislikes. If you'd kept house for Dingleby, now!"

Geraldine shivered. "Peter, please, not even in jest."

"I'm not jesting. I'm in grim, deadly earnest. I've been doing a great deal of thinking in the past few days. To me you are the finest woman imaginable. Good, generous, unselfish, sensitive, and religious in the best and only proper sense. But you may not be to everyone. I'm not so sure, as I grow older, that any one of us is qualified to pass judgment, although I've just condemned Dingleby."

"But without certain criticisms there would be no standards."

He lifted his eyebrows and looked at her quizzically. "Where are we, my love?" he said with an inflection of cynicism, "with those certain criticisms?"

"Winning the war for one thing," said Geraldine, warming to her theme. . . .

Mr. Proberty," said Rose.

* * * * *

There was a slight flush on Geraldine's cheeks as she rose to greet the old man. "We're starting an argument, Mr. Proberty," she told him. "Peter began by reproving me for criticizing Alaric Dingleby now that he's dead, and then he changed his attack and began deploring the facility of criticism towards the living."

"Argument is to the intellect what seasoning is to the gastronome," said Mr. Proberty, settling himself rather breathlessly in a chair. "Dear me, I am short of breath. I do apologize. Breathing like an old grampus all over your room. I'm getting on, you know. Seventy-eight next birthday. Quite an age. And your Uncle Charles—now how old would he be?"

"Eighty," said Peter.

"Eighty. Well, I shall be seeing him soon. You know, my dear," he turned to Geraldine, "I am always so grateful to you, Charles was so

grateful to you also for not changing this room when you came to live here. There was a permanence about this room to me, before you came, that would have been an irreparable loss if it had gone to make way for more modern trends of decoration."

"That's how it felt to me," she answered. "We didn't want to change it."

Mr. Proberty screwed up his eyes and peered at the bookshelves. "It was never so tidy in Charles's day. Half the books were on the floor. Easier to find when we were disputing. You know, I've never taken punch since Charles went. Somehow, I felt without either Charles or his room it wasn't going to taste right. So I never risked it. We used to brew it in here on winter evenings while Charles quoted Shakespeare. One of these days, my dear," he nodded at her like a benign idol, "you shall brew me your Uncle Charles's punch and I will tell you some stories about him. Now I have another duty to perform. Rather, shall we say, another story to tell you to-day."

"You know, sir, I have been a little curious about your visit." Peter leaned forward.

The ghost of a chuckle escaped the old man and went echoing round the room.

"All my life," he said, twinkling, "people have been a little curious about my visits. I have found it . . . entertaining. 'Old Proberty,' they used to say, 'close as an oyster.' Lawyers should be close. Part of their duty."

"And you have fulfilled it faithfully," Peter murmured.

"No," said Mr. Proberty surprisingly, "I have lapsed from grace."

Geraldine smiled at him affectionately. "I can hardly imagine that, Mr. Proberty."

"Well, my dear, believe it or not, it is true. And in this room, and to your Uncle Charles."

"Are you going to tell us what it was about?"

"I am." He placed his finger-tips together carefully. "It was about the Dinglebys. Long ago when they were young, Alaric and Amelia, I mean, when I first tried to broach the subject of those unfortunate houses, I came to Charles and I told him all about it. Again I committed a breach of faith in comparatively recent times. About two years before Charles died certain knowledge came into my possession, and I shared it with him."

"And you are going to tell us about that, too, in your own good time?"

Again Mr. Proberty nodded. "By the way, have you seen the papers this morning?"

"Only about the inquest. Rose brought them up just before you came. She said there was nothing unpleasant."

"Is that all you have seen?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, I think," he smiled broadly and rubbed his hands together. "I think you should look again. Try the third page of *The Times*."

Peter reached out his hand for it and turned over the pages.

"Here it is," he said at last. "Gerry, it's in *The Times*, the sanitary report on Easterbridge. Every single word of it. This will compensate for the experience of the last few weeks."

Geraldine held out her hands. "Let me read it. Let me see it myself. I can't believe it's really happened."

"It's a strange document to give you pleasure," said Mr. Proberty. "The facts are unpleasing. Very unpleasing."

The Heathersteads put their heads together over the paper.

"Listen to this," Geraldine cried, "just listen. Here it is; this is what I wanted everyone to know:

"*Provisional Classification of houses, according to fitness for habitation and state of repair.*

"Class 1.	Houses totally unfit for habitation, requiring urgent demolition	402
„ 2.	Houses unfit for habitation, unsuitable for reconditioning, requiring demolition	800
„ 3.	Houses borderline between Class 1 and 2	217
„ 4.	Houses unfit for habitation but suitable for reconditioning	340 340
„ 5.	Houses not necessarily unfit for habitation but with extensive defects capable of being remedied	731
„ 6.	Houses of good standard and in a good state of repair or requiring only normal maintenance repairs	2,011

"It means that out of four and a half thousand houses over a thousand require demolition, and a further two hundred odd are only on the borderline! No wonder there are people who have tried to stop these figures being made public."

"Listen to this," said Peter, flapping the paper excitedly. " 'The degree of bed-bug infestation is not assuring. . . . Detailed inspection reveals that two hundred and twenty were verminous. . . .' And again, on the housing of old people. . . . 'In nearly every case these houses were totally inadequate for the needs of the old persons living alone. In some cases the prevailing conditions are shocking.' "

"I couldn't be more pleased," said Geraldine, lifting her head. "Fancy our not noticing it? But surely you did not come up here just to discuss this, Mr. Proberty? No, you couldn't have done. You didn't know . . ." she broke off and looked at him suspiciously.

"Did you know?"

"Well," Mr. Proberty coughed gently, "shall we say I had a shrewd suspicion that the disclosures were imminent. But to the business on hand. As you say, my visit was not solely upon this score. You will remember that I mentioned just now that I had a story to tell you?"

"Yes."

"Well, here it is. The story I told Charles. It's very short. It concerns a communication which I received from the late Mrs. Alaric Dingleby."

"The *late Mrs. Alaric Dingleby*," cried Geraldine. Her face whitened. "But . . . but I saw her . . . recently."

A lifetime of habit deserted Mr. Proberty. His face was blank with astonishment, his eyes startled and dubious. "But how could that possibly be so? I received a communication from her only—let me see," he put one hand to his head in bewilderment, "yes—within a day or so three weeks to a month ago."

"Where did the letter come from," faltered Geraldine.

"From her home. At least, from the hotel in Bournemouth where she retained a suite. I do not feel that it matters to reveal that now."

"Suite . . . Bournemouth . . . but she was *here*."

"In this house?"

"No—no! She was staying at the 'Crown.' Her maid intercepted me at church the day the Bishop preached, and at her request I went to the 'Crown.'"

"To see Mrs. Dingleby?"

"I did not know it was she. I was merely asked to visit a lady who had something to say to me about housing. Then, when I arrived, she disclosed her identity."

"May I inquire what passed at the interview?" said Mr. Proberty, partially regaining his habitual calm and watching Geraldine intently.

"Certainly. She was very strange, very remote and controlled, but I think she was amused about something. She offered to sell me her houses, her share of the Dingleby houses, which I suppose she inherited from Lady Dingleby, if I could persuade Alaric to sell his."

There was a brief silence. Then Mr. Proberty began piecing the tale together. "And so you went to Alaric, and you failed, and Alaric died."

"Yes," said Geraldine.

"There is the hand of God in this somewhere," he said unsteadily, passing his tongue across his lips. Perhaps it would be as well for me to continue with my tale. Theodora, Mrs. Dingleby, died in her suite two days before Alaric died at 'Laurelston.' What she wished to do, what she had in mind, what was her motive in approaching you after all these years, we shall never know. But if these things are surrounded in mystery for us, there is no mystery to me in the outcome of it all."

There was a strange prophetic note to his voice. Peter and Geraldine watched him. Then the door opened and Rose came in with a tray. Without looking up, Geraldine said, "Rose, you know so much, you have endured so much, please stay and hear what is being said," and Rose set down her tray, slipped into a chair and waited with folded hands.

"When Theodora Dingleby died," said Mr. Proberty slowly, "she left her entire fortune to the Actors' and Artists' Benevolent Association. Here I must digress on my subsequent visit to Mr. Dingleby. It must have been a few hours before you arrived. I experienced a similar reception to the one you suffered more recently. Mr. Dingleby ordered me from the house before I could remind him that it would be necessary

for him to make a fresh will, since his existing will was now redundant."

Mr. Proberty avoided their eyes as he spoke. Because he did not wish to encounter the dawning realizations which were reflected in them. "In his existing will," he went on, "Mr. Dingleby left all his possessions to his wife, should she be alive and with him at the time of his death. Well, as we all know, she was not with him, and, as you now know, she is dead. Therefore," he went on, "unless, when we finally clear all filth and disorder from 'Laurelston', another will is found, you, as his next of kin, are heir to his property," and he looked straight at Geraldine.

Geraldine rose from her chair and went over to the windows.

Mr. Proberty went on talking. "Please do not make any comment upon this news until I have finished. As you must know already Alaric Dingleby had dissipated his entire fortune long ago. He subsisted in recent years upon his slender earnings as an artist and upon the rents from his two hundred houses in this town. When he became short of money he disposed of some more furniture. Latterly, his needs became so simple that they might almost be called primitive. Now that he is dead, and you are presumably his sole legatee, I must tell you that, as considerable sums are still owing to various tradesmen, of which I knew nothing, it will probably be necessary to dispose of nearly everything to meet the demands upon the estate."

Geraldine turned round. "Sell, Mr. Proberty?"

"Yes, my dear, sell. But it may not be necessary to sell the two hundred houses, of which, incidentally, at least fifty are concerned in Clauses A and B of the report. If no other will has come to light, and if, of course, you are agreeable, you may take it as very likely that the houses will become your own." It was as he said this that the old man permitted himself to smile.

"After all these years," said Geraldine. She moved back across the room, her eyes heavy with unshed tears. "I get the houses—and they can be pulled down. And yet, now that it has happened, I can only think of the piteous, damnable waste of lives that has been brought about because this was not allowed to happen years ago. By what means can one justify the waste! Polly Sedge might be alive to-day if it had not been for the damp in her home, Perce might never have been a criminal, nor May Burrage . . . what she was."

"Listen, Geraldine," Peter put out his hand and caught her fingers, "listen to me. Look nearer home, my darling, and you may find it easier to accept. If this country had not gone to war in nineteen fourteen I might have been a healthy man to-day, but because we fought I took my chance with the rest and came off a lot better than most, but still not unscathed. You never complained about that until you began to believe it was in a worthless cause. Then you became angry—as I did myself. Now this war has happened, this part two of the first struggle, in which heroism has struck new levels and made fresh history. Now neither of us care any more. We are glad that we could lose something in the common cause, because we have been fortunate enough to see the cause prosper after a dreadful interim of defeat. So it can be with Easterbridge. Polly and

Perce and May, they're all victims of the housing cause. In a sense they died for a good reason. It wasn't a good reason while nothing was done. It wasn't a good reason at all. It was dreadful, and sinful, and horrible, but it isn't any more, because what happened to them is becoming common knowledge, and they are rising from the small tragedies of their own lives to be the simple martyrs to a great cause."

While he spoke the door opened and Charlie Soames came softly into the room. Peter nodded to him and went on. "All the people down on The Rock who have lived in unmarked squalor have lived to a good purpose now, because their lives are being made public. It won't all come right in a few days, nor weeks, nor even years, but it will improve. We shall make the beginning. When we get Alaric's houses and we see them come down to make way for homes fit for men and women to live in. What we start, others will continue, because it will be common knowledge and common shame that these horrors still exist."

He paused and looked across at Charlie. "Am I not right, Charlie?" he said serenely.

"You're right enough, Mr. 'Eatherstead. You can't build an A1 nation out of a C3 house, and the public is beginning to know it. Now that the report is public and our Bishop on the job we've started something which, please God, will never stop until the last bug-ridden tenement is pulled down."

Geraldine let go of her husband's hand. "You're right," she said slowly. "All we must do is to see that those houses come down. If we do just that then we shall clear our debt to the poor that have lived and died in them. And if we don't there will be no peace, no matter how completely we appear to win this war."

Then she turned in her chair, faced Charlie, who was watching her with shining eyes, and she told him what had passed, and that the first two hundred houses would be pulled down as soon as she could obtain the necessary permission."

Mr. Proberty was sunk in a pool of thought, lying back in his chair with his hands up to his face. Peter Heatherstead leaned back on his day-bed—frail, tranquil—his eyes on his wife. Charlie stood hat in hand, and Geraldine was smiling.

Suddenly, Rose got to her feet. "But what about the Dinglebys," she said huskily, "and wot they did. All of them, who never cared, except Miss Augusta!" Her weary eyes were weighted with recollection and the corridors of the past were opened and lit for her to see. She was a young girl again, rosy-cheeked, running swiftly down the stairs of "Laurelston" to catch Tommy at the back door on the day that Sir Josiah was buried; she was crouched with Bet on the attic floor, peering through a hole in the blind, as the funeral procession wound slowly down the drive and out into the roadway; she was at home with Mrs. O'Twigh in the house down on The Rock, in the stark, unlovely poverty of those surroundings; she was one of the group of servants round the table at midday dinner—Jellaby lounged coatless at the top, picking his teeth and reviling the family; she was standing with her back against the wall as Amelia came down the

corridor on the arm of her husband Clarence Witherspoon; she was at Amelia's bedside and the nurse hissing instructions while Amelia writhed in dry labour; she was crouched against the wall at the far end of the hall and the horrible scene was replaying before her eyes—the tangled huddle of drapes and flesh that had been Lady Dingleby, Theodora stark and rigid with her head high and her eyes glazed, and the three fantastic players demented with drunken hysteria; and she was flat against the wall once more with Alaric leering over her, proposing filth loosely, and her hand was tingling from the slap which marked his flaccid cheek.

They all watched Rose as she stood staring. They all listened as she spoke once more. "Ef the 'and of God's give you them houses wot's the 'and of God done to them?" she cried.

And it was Peter who answered her. "In loneliness and bitterness, Rose, in emptiness and failure, they, too, have been answered. They sowed, and they harvested, and though I shall always say that we are none of us ever, in this world at least, equipped to stand in judgment upon our fellows, yet we may regard with awe and fearfulness the unrelenting power of that Force which is endowed to apportion praise and blame." He put out his hand to his wife once more, and she reached over and clasped it between her own. Silently Mr. Proberty and Charlie went out of the room, Rose followed them, and the Heathersteads were left alone together.

Then Geraldine did what she had been trying to do for many days.

She sat down and wrote to the Bishop.

THE END